



## What Was Once Broken by mcplestreet

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**Summary:** As he waited for her to get back from the lab Mike felt like a complete emotional wreck. How could he survive losing her again after only having her back for half an hour? He didn't think he could. Eleven set in after Eleven closes the gate.

# 1. Chapter 1

hello everyone! I'm not sure I'll be continuing this story unless I can think of a direction I want to take it in. For now it will just be a one shot. Feel free to comment suggestions as to how I could continue this story (such as the conflict or ending). Enjoy!

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"Steve drive faster."

"I'm not going to go over the speed limit just because you want to see your girlfriend."

Mike groaned and leaned back in the back seat of Steve's car. He was tightly packed in between Lucas and Dustin who were bickering about what had happened with the lights when they made it out of the upside down. Dustin said it had something to do with them killing the hive. Lucas, ever the realist, argued that it was probably just something wrong with the car. But Mike knew what it had been. He could just *feel* it. Feel her.

The ride back to the Byers house was excruciating. He had been a nervous wreck the second Hopper's truck started driving away. Regret took over him completely the second she was gone. How could he let her go back to that place? How could he not go with her? She had been so determined and sure that she would be fine. What if she was overestimating herself? Mike didn't know what he would do if he only got to see her for a half hour at most and then never saw her again. The thought alone made every cell in his body ache with regret and worry.

"Mike, chill." Dustin said while looking down at his leg that bounced up and down repeatedly. Even on a normal day Mike was a restless kid. But with his nerves he was practically vibrating. "It's gonna be fine."

He leaned the back of his head against the seat and closed his eyes. "You don't know that." Mike said. He was afraid to say it too loud in case he jinxed things.

"Yeah, we do." Lucas replied. It was sometimes hard to remember how much he had once hated Eleven. "She was okay after last time, remember?"

"This is different." Mike muttered. "You guys weren't there. You didn't see what it was like. Those things are all over the place. There was only one last time." He didn't feel like there was even a point in mentioning that on top of everything else she was walking back into the place she had been held prisoner and forced to be experimented on for almost her entire life.

He felt Dustin put a hand on his shoulder and forced himself not to shake it off. "She'll be okay." He said. He sounded so sure.

Mike fell silent and listened to the sound of the car. There was nothing he could say that could make them feel the worry he felt. They didn't understand her like he did. They hadn't cried themselves to sleep for a whole month. They hadn't called her every night. It took everything in him to not have a total nervous breakdown.

When they finally pulled back in front of the Byers house everyone went inside while Mike sat down on the steps out front. No one said anything but they left the front door open. Just in case. With no one around to distract him he stared out at the street and felt his whole body start to shake. He was glad no one had offered to sit with him when tears escaped from his eyes and rolled down his freckled cheeks. He couldn't lose her again. He simple couldn't.

Mike remembered how Lucas used to tease him about his crush on Eleven and how defensively he denied it. He also remembered how he called the idea 'gross' when Nancy brought it up. He now regretted not being totally and completely honest from the beginning. Then again it had never occurred to him that she would one day just disappear. It felt like he had all the time in the world. And, in his defense Nancy also lied about Johnathan. He could just tell.

By the time someone came out to check on him he had ran out of silent tears. He didn't turn to see who had come outside until he spotted bright red hair sitting down next to him on the step. Mike remained silent and watched Max carefully out of the corner of his eye. Out of all the people who could have come to check on him he

didn't expect it to be Max. He knew the way he'd been treating her was wrong but the only thing he could think of when he saw her with his friends is that it should have been Eleven.

They sat in silent for a few minutes, both staring out at the road ahead of them. There was about three inches of space between them. The wood underneath their feet was shaking from Mike's bouncing legs. Max quietly cleared her throat. "Look, I get it." She said. "Why you hate me and everything."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She shifted a little bit next to him. "You think that they're trying to replace her with me. And you think that if they do that they're going to forget about her and you'll be the only one who remembers."

Her words felt like a punch in the chest. How was she able to see so clearly what her friends were totally oblivious of? Mike pulled his legs closer to his chest and didn't dare look over at her. They knew Eleven was alive and yet she still wasn't with them. It was all wrong. "It's like they don't even miss her anymore." He choked out. His voice was just barely above a whisper but the neighborhood was quiet enough that he was sure she heard him.

"Do you know what a divorce is?" she asked. Mike didn't think he could speak anymore without his voice failing him so he simply nodded. "My parents are divorced. When my mom met my step dad she said it would be good to get a fresh start so we moved here." Max sighed and moved her hair behind her ears. "It's like the second we left California my dad just didn't exist. There's no pictures of him in the house and no one ever mentions him. I found out a couple of days ago that if my mom answers his calls she would tell him I'm not home."

Mike's eyebrows pulled together. "Why would she do that?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her shrug. "I don't know. I haven't spoken to her since I found out." They were once again silent in a surprisingly comfortable way. Never in a million years would Mike have thought they had something in common. Had she too developed

a bit of an attitude because she was bitter at the people who had forgotten who she cared about? "You know you don't have to worry about me replacing her." Max said after a few minutes. "She's, like, a million times cooler than me. And I see the way you guys talk about her. And look at her. I can tell she's really important to all of you."

If only she knew. "I think they stopped talking about her in the beginning because of me. They didn't want me to have some kind of breakdown so they didn't talk about her all that much. Then they stopped talking about her altogether." Mike pulled his jacket together and close to his chest. The zipper was broken and it had started to get cold since night had fallen hours ago. "I never brought her up because it was too hard." Mike couldn't believe what he was telling her. They were things he had never dared to say out loud. He figured it had something to do with the fact that his emotions were a bit of a mess as he waited for Eleven to get back.

"Did you really call her every day that whole time?" she asked. Mike nodded once again. For a second he had forgotten other people were in the room when Eleven walked in and that they could hear everything he had said to her. His cheeks felt a bit warm that she was bringing it up. "How did you keep calling her for so long if you never got an answer? That sounds like torture."

Mike sighed quietly. "Have you ever met someone and know by the end of the day that you just *need* them to be in your life? Or feel like you can't breathe when you're not with them? Like suddenly you need them more than you need oxygen."

Max shook her head. "No." she said. "I don't know what it's like."

"It's probably the best and the worst feeling in the world all at once." He said. Mike had spent so much time too afraid to talk about her but suddenly everything was spilling out of his mouth like a waterfall of words. "We found her when we were looking for Will. No one else had any place to keep her, and we didn't want to tell our parents about her, so she lived in my basement." He let out a laugh that lacked any sort of humor. "I thought that it was my job to protect her because she was staying with me. But I was too busy trying to take care of her to realize that she was the one protecting me. Until it was too late."

Max must have picked up on how he was struggling to hold back a fresh wave of tears because she put her hand on his back. He didn't feel like pushing her away. "One of the monsters got in the school one night while we were there." He continued. "She killed it. I knew she wasn't strong enough, and I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't let me. So I closed my eyes. When I opened them she was just... gone. Like she hadn't even been there in the first place."

Mike's voice cracked and he quickly put his hands over his eyes. He felt like every muscle in his body was being tied into knots. The pain of not having her was so much worse when he knew for a fact that she was out there somewhere. So close yet still out of reach. Max rubbed his back gently and didn't say a word as the floodgates once again opened. If a few hours ago he'd been told Max Mayfield would be rubbing his back while he cried he probably would have laughed. But after what she told him he was glad that she had been the one to come out and check on him.

He had no idea how long he sat there hidden behind his hands. It felt like at least half an hour. Neither of them said very much. Ever ten minutes or so Max would whisper that it was okay for him to just let it all out. Mike was just starting to settle down when he felt her shaking his shoulder. "Mike, look."

His hands dropped in his lap and he looked up. A pair of headlights had just come into view a little more than ten yards away. Mike quickly pushed himself to his feet and ran as fast as he could towards the now approaching car. His heart pounded as he got closer. With the lights shining in his face he couldn't look into the car well enough to see if Eleven was sitting in the passenger's seat. He was just able to make out that it was Hoppers truck.

Only a couple feet away from reaching it the cars headlights suddenly shut off. Mike stopped and squinted in through the front windshield. Relief flooded through his body when he spotted her sitting inside. But as Hopper got out of the truck he could see that she didn't look good. Her skin was pale and he could see the veins in her face even from where he stood. Dried blood was coming out from both her ears and her nose. Her eyes were closed and her head was rested against the window.

He could hear Hopper walking over to him but his eyes were fixed on her. "What happened to her?" he choked out. He'd never seen her look so weak before. It was a scary sight.

"She did it." Hopper replied simply. He felt his hand land on his shoulder before he added "She needs some help walking."

Mike didn't need to be told twice. He hurried over to the passenger's side door and knocked on the window. She needed to pick her head up before he could open it. Her eyes opened slowly and for a moment her face remained blank. When she saw him standing outside her lips twitched upwards and she managed to pick her head up just enough to rest it on the back of the seat. Mike opened the door and reached across her to unbuckle her seat belt for her. She didn't need to move any more than necessary. "Can you stand up by yourself?" he asked

"Yes." Her voice sounded just about as weak as she looked. She gripped the door as she turned in her seat to face him. Every movement she made took about three times as long as it should have but he could see her determination to get out by herself. When her feet touched the ground she kept her back pressed against the car and looked up at him. He took the silent signal and wrapped his arm around her waist. She leaned heavily against his side and took baby steps away from the van. "I told you I would be fine." She mumbled as Hopper closed the door behind them.

Mike laughed and held onto her tighter. "Yeah, you did."

Max had gone inside to tell everyone that they'd come back and the whole group was waiting on the front porch by the time they made it. They all moved out of the way when they took one look at her. Mike helped her over to the couch inside the Byers living room. He held onto her waist and she kept her arms locked around his neck as she leaned backwards. Mike could feel everyone watching them carefully but he didn't care. Eleven sunk into the couch once she was laying down and he could see her struggling to keep her eyes open.

"Are you cold?" he asked her. "I can get you a blanket or something."

Before he could move her hand tightly clamped onto his wrist. "No." she told him. "Stay. Please."



Mike sat down on the floor leaning against the couch. She slowly but surely turned on her side to face him despite how much as he told her to stay still. Everyone behind them just watched. Just as she started to get settled Hopper came over with a blanket and a glass of water. He set the cup on an end table only a few feet away and covered her up. Mike tore his eyes away from her to look up at him. "What happened in there?" he asked

Hopper shook his head and quietly cleared his throat. "I, uh, I don't know." He admitted. "It was different from the upside down. Worse. Angier. I can't imagine what it was like for Will. For all of that to be in his head."

"I saw it." Eleven mumbled. When Mike looked back over at her he instantly recognized fear in her brown eyes. Only worse than he'd ever seen. Worse than when they found her and worse than when the lab found her. "The mind flayer."

No one knew what to say. So no one said anything.

It was nearing 2 AM when Steve volunteered to start driving the kids home. Even though it was a Saturday night and no one had school the next day they figured it wouldn't be a good idea if everyone's parents woke up to empty beds. The last thing they needed was for another family to think their kid was missing. They all stood in the doorway when Steve looked over at him still sitting on the floor. "You coming, Mike?"

"No." he answered simply

"I'll get my mom to cover for you." Dustin offered. "We can call your place in the morning and say you're with me."

Mike nodded and thanked him before they all left. Hopper volunteered to clean the place up a bit so the Byers wouldn't have to come home to a mess. While he wandered around the house sprucing things up Mike sat with his chin resting on the couch and his hand wrapped around Eleven's. Words could never describe how amazing it felt to be looking at her in front of him again. He remembered the day that she tried to contact Will in the schools AV room. When they got back home she had collapsed on the couch very similarly to how

she was now.

The gel she had put in her hair was starting to lose its strength and curly strands were starting to escape. He smoothed one down and smiled at her. "I like this look." He told her. "It's pretty badass."

She grinned up at him. Her eyes were only half open and she looked exhausted. She needed to sleep but he could tell she wouldn't let herself. "Bitchin." She said weakly.

Hopper wandered back into the living room somewhere around 3. Mike could see his eyes wander down to their intertwined hands but he didn't say anything. "I'll come back tomorrow to finish up. Joyce and the boys will probably want to get some sleep when they get back." He raised an eyebrow at Mike. "I'm assuming you're coming with us?"

Mike nodded eagerly. The two of them picked Eleven up off the couch and practically carried her out to the truck. She could barely pick her feet up off the ground. Mike got into the back of the truck and she took the passenger's seat once more. They drove about ten feet before her head dropped down onto her shoulder. Minutes later soft snoring filled the car.

He propped his elbows on the arm rest in the middle of the two seats and leaned forward so that he could see her. "I didn't think her hair would be curly." He said quietly.

"Yeah." Hopper agreed. "She was pretty excited when it started growing out. Said it looked like Dustin's." They drove about a block in silence until Hopper took one hand off the wheel to rest on Mike's shoulder to grab his attention. "Hey, kid, I'm sorry I never said anything to you. I thought I was doing what was best for her."

Some of his anger had passed over the last few hours. But he still got a bitter taste in his mouth when he thought about how she had been so close to him the whole time. "I saw you, like, once a week and you never thought it was a good idea?"

"Well she was always asking me to check up on you." Hopper told him. "I kept telling her that she could see you one day when it was

safe. Every time I thought it would be okay something would happen with Will. I got scared." He glanced over at him quickly. "She left once before to go find you. Said she saw you with some girl."

"Yeah, I know." Mike said. "I felt her there. But whatever she thinks she saw isn't true."

Hopper put one of his hands up. "Okay, I'm just checking." He said. "She was all upset about it. I left for work and next thing I know she's got a makeover and telling me she went to see her mother."

Mike raised an eyebrow at him. "She has a mother?"

"Yeah." Hopper shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Terry Ives. The lab got to her and... did something. She's in the catatonic state and doesn't even know what's going on around her." He glanced over at the now passed out Eleven. "Her name is Jane."

Mike looked over at Eleven- no, Jane- sleeping next to him. He had missed almost a years' worth of moments with her. She grew her hair out, she found her mother, knew what her name was. He'd missed all of it. How much more had he missed? He tried to tell himself that it didn't matter and that he would be there for twice as many moments as he missed.

Hopper pulled the truck to a stop somewhere in the woods. Mike didn't ask any questions as he got out on the driver's side and helped Eleven out of the car. They both supported her on the walk that was much longer than he expected it to be. The cabin that Hopper had mentioned to Joyce and Johnathan eventually came into view. The place where she'd been all that time. When he walked inside he instantly spotted broken glass scattered across the floor along with just general mess. He shot Hopper a questioning glance to which he simply replied with "She had a bit of an episode a couple of days ago."

Her eyes shut once more almost immediately after her head hit the pillow. The room was small but surprisingly homey. He lingered inside for a few moments before following Hopper back out into the kitchen area just in time to see him grab a beer from the fridge. "You hungry?" he asked

Mike shrugged his shoulders and sat in one of the chairs at the table. He wondered which one she usually sat in. "I guess."

His eyes widened slightly at the sight of a familiar yellow box being pulled out of the freezer. Hopper popped four frozen waffles into the toaster before coming over and sitting across from him. "So you're responsible for her Eggo obsession, huh?" he asked

He couldn't help but smile. How had she not gotten sick of them yet? He hadn't been able to touch one since she was gone. "I used to sneak them for her before I left for school." He said. "It was the only thing she ever wanted."

"It still is." Hopper said. For probably the first time since Mike had met him Hopper smiled. He took a sip from the bottle in front of him. Mike wished he was old enough to drink. He felt like he needed one. But he didn't dare mention it to the chief of police. "She tried to get me to let her go out on Halloween. Said no one would see her if she dressed up as a ghost."

Mike grinned at the thought. "Me and my friends were the only ones who dressed up at school." He admitted. At the time he thought it had been the end of the world. But it was nothing compared to not even being able to leave the house on Halloween. "It was pretty embarrassing."

"Yeah, sounds like it." Hopper agreed. "Sometimes I forget that you guys are such big nerds."

He shot him a half hearted glare just as the waffles popped out of the toaster. Hopper got up and grabbed two plates and utensils before bringing them back over to the table. He slid a plate in front of Mike and sat back down across from him. They cut up their waffles in silence. It wasn't until he was five bites in that Hopper spoke up again. "So what's this Snow Ball she hasn't been able to shut up about?"

Mike stared down at his plate for a moment before he lost it. He dropped his fork onto the table and hid his face behind his hands. December had probably been the worst month without her. With every day that passed he became more and more worried that he

would be forced to break his promise to her. The night of the dance he had locked himself in his room and didn't answer when his family knocked on his door.

Try as he might to collect himself the tears seemed endless. Hoppers chair scraped against the floor as he moved to sit next to him. He sat next to him and didn't say a word. He just let him get it out like Max had. Mike wondered when his emotions would start to get under control.

When he finally managed to calm down enough he wiped off his cheeks and looked over at Hopper. "Sorry." He mumbled

"It's fine." Hopper said. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

As he stood up and moved his chair to the other side of the table they both picked their head up at the sound of a weak voice coming from the other room. "Mike?" he practically jumped up out of his seat and hurried into the bedroom. When he stood in the doorway he spotted her propped up on her elbows and her eyebrows knit together on her forehead. "What's wrong?" She asked as he walked over to her.

"Nothing." He told her. Mike sat down next to her on the bed and took her hand. "I just missed you."

Eleven smiled softly and leaned back until she was laying down again. "I missed you too, Mike." She said. It was a miracle that she was still awake.

"Hey, so, um," He shifted a bit and looked down at his hand holding onto hers. "Hopper said that you came to the school a couple of days ago. That you saw me talking to Max." Mike looked up just in time to see her expression fall and her eyes look away from him. With her dark clothes and black eye shadow her now angry face looked a little bit scary. "I don't want you to think anything. She's just my friend."

"But I'm your friend also." She said quietly.

Mike couldn't help but be a bit impressed at her use of the word 'also'. Hopper must have been teaching her over the past year. "No, El, you're different." He told her. "You're more than just my friend."

She slowly opened her eyes again and looked at him. Her face had softened slightly. "Am I your girlfriend?"

He could feel his face flushing a deep shade of red. With only one lamp on in the room there were heavy shadowed across both their faces but he doubted it was enough to hide his pink cheeks. "Um, yeah. If you want to be." Mike watched her lips twitch upwards. Her anger about bringing up Max seemed to have faded. "Did Hopper tell you what that meant?"

"No." she said. "All I do is watch TV. All day. Nothing else here." Her smile grew ever so slightly. "I learned things."

Mike couldn't help but smile back at her. "What else did you learn?"

"To talk better." She told him. Slowly she turned on her side to face him. "Cleaning. Rules. Compromise. Consequences." Her nose crinkled up slightly. "Don't like those."

"Yeah, they suck." Mike agreed.

She tugged on his hand lightly. "Come here."

He looked over out the door to make sure Hopper was nowhere in sight. Sure enough he couldn't any sign of him. Mike turned back around and lay down next to her on his side facing her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and moved as close to her as he could while still keeping a bit of space between them just in case Hopper were to walk in. Eleven draped her arm across his shoulder and closed her eyes once more.

"You said you needed me." She mumbled.

Her voice was hardly even a whisper and he only heard her well enough to know she spoke. "Hm?"

"On Halloween you said you needed me." She said just loud enough for him to make out. "So I came to look for you."

Mike held her tighter against him and rested his cheek on the top of her head. She really had heard.

## 2. Chapter 2

back at it again with another chapter. I think I actually know how I want to continue this story so stay tuned for updates I suppose. hope you like this chapter!

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Mike felt a headache pounding in his brain before he even opened his eyes. A pained groan escaped his lips and he turned over and hid his face in the pillow underneath him. Flashes from a particularly vivid dream rushed through his mind like a tsunami. Demogorgons littering the lab and killing everyone in sight. Killing Bob. The Mind Flayer taking over Will's body completely. His heart to heart with Max on the Byers front steps. Eleven walking through the Byers front door. Curls on top of her head escaping the gel that pushed them down. Hopper telling him that she'd been with him the whole time. He groaned again and wished that for once he would be able to escape the pain of missing her for just *one night*.

As he floated more and more into consciousness he could hear voices somewhere in the distance. But it wasn't the familiar sound of Nancy or his mom he usually heard early in the morning. With his face still buried in the pillow he listened closer to the slightly distant voices.

"No work?"

"Nope, I'm staying home today kid."

"Special... occasion?"

"Definitely."

Mile bolted upright in an unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar room. There wasn't much inside the small room other than the bed. There was a dresser with a radio and a folded bandana sitting on top, children's books, and a collection of VHS tapes. Tossed onto the end of the bed next to his feet was a black men's blazer and a tissue covered in black eyeliner. Images of Eleven from his dream flashed through his mind once more. If he stayed in that bed forever he would never have to face the possibility that it had simply been a

particularly creative dream and he, for whatever reason, hadn't fallen asleep at home.

"Can I wake him up now?"

"Let him sleep a little more."

"I want to see him."

He would be able to recognize her voice anywhere. Mike eagerly pushed himself onto his feet and hurried the short distance from the bed to the kitchen. His eyes landed on Eleven just in time to see her jump out of her chair. In a second she was in front of him and had her arms wrapped around his waist. She looked different from the night before, sporting her curly hair and baggy flannel instead, but there was no doubt it was her. Mike was only partially aware of Hopper's presence until she pulled away from him and they both headed over to the table. His cheeks flushed pink when he remembered how he had broken down crying at the mere mention of the Snow Ball. Once they were sitting Hopper reached behind him and grabbed a plate that he set down in front of Mike.

"When was the last time you ate?" he asked when picked his utensils back up.

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "Haven't really had the time." He mumbled. The truth was he had no idea. He had been so worried about Will, and then with everything that happened at the hospital, that things like eating and homework hadn't been a fraction of a thought for a couple days. But it wasn't until he started cutting into the first piece of Eggo that he realized how hungry he really was.

"How is Will?" Eleven asked, a deep crease settling in her forehead as she looked up at Hopper.

"Joyce said he was okay when I called her this morning." Hopper said in between bites. "He had a few nightmares last night. But no more of those... what do you call them?"

"Now memories?" Mike finished for him.

"Yeah. I'm gonna go over and visit as soon as I get someone to come



over here."

The worried expression on Eleven's face turned to one of annoyance. "Don't need a babysitter." She said, stabbing a piece of waffle a bit aggressively.

"After this-" Hopper waved his fork around the room to indicate the mess she had made, "and you going AWOL me yes you do."

"AWOL?"

"Missing."

Eleven made an annoyed noise and shoved the Eggo into her mouth. Mike wondered if things between them got so tense often. They both had tempers like firecrackers so he figured it was safe to say that it wasn't uncommon. The air around them turned slightly heavy and if Mike wasn't so happy to just be next to her he would have been squirming in his seat.

A minute or two passed before she spoke again. Her eyes were fixed on her plate and she was turning her fork between her fingers. "You don't want me alone with Mike." She said just loud enough for them to hear.

Mike didn't dare look at either of them. His cheeks felt as red as the table top they were eating off of. In his peripheral vision he could see Hopper set his fork down before rubbing a hand over his mouth. Mike could practically hear the gears turning in his head as he tried to think of how to reply to her. "Look, kid," he said eventually, "I'm trying to do what's best for you, okay? Sometimes that means things you don't necessarily like."

"Like not seeing him for 353 days?"

If she wasn't talking to Hopper, and if things weren't so awkward, Mike might have laughed. Yet another thing he had missed in the past year was the development of her feisty attitude. He would have been fine with someone coming over to keep an eye on then but he didn't dare say it out loud and interject in the conversation. How often had they had a conversation about her seeing him? The way

they both acted after she said it gave him the impression it was often. Mike snuck a glance at Hopper who seemed, for a moment, stumped.

Hopper rested his elbows on the table on either side of his now empty plate. He closed his eyes for a minute or two and Mike imagined he was trying to think of what to say to her. "Alright, what about this, how about we compromise. Remember what that means?" Eleven nodded so eagerly that her hair fell down into her eyes. "I'm going to go to Joyce's house for an hour and then I'm coming right back. You two can stay here *if* you answer when I radio immediately and you clean up some of the mess."

Mike glanced over at Eleven just in time to see her frown at the mention of having to clean up. Under the table he bumped his foot against hers to get her attention. When her eyes met his her expression fell neutral once more. Like many times before Mike was sure they had a silent conversation simply by looking at one another. After a moment she looked back at Hopper and mumbled a quiet "fine."

"Good." Hopper said, picking up his plate and bringing it over to the sink on the other side of the counter. Once he was in the other room Eleven let go of her fork and put her hand on top of his. There were a million things Mike wanted to say to her, but none of them with Hopper standing a few feet away. So he simply settled for holding onto her hand and smiling at her. When the water stopped running he didn't bother pulling away from her.

"I'm going to get dressed and go." Hopper said as he headed into the other room. "Finish eating so you don't get hungry again and waste food."

When he disappeared into what Mike assumed was a second bedroom down the short hallway Eleven picked her fork back up. "He doesn't like wasting." She said before stabbing one of the remaining pieces of waffle.

Mike's stomach was now too full of butterflies for him to be particularly hungry. He hadn't realized how asleep his mind and body had been until he was one again next to her and felt fully alive once more. Still he forced another bite down his throat to keep from getting

scolded from Hopper. "I still can't believe you were here the whole time." He said quietly, his mind thinking back to the countless nights he had longed for her so badly he could feel his heart breaking.

Eleven turned towards him in her chair, her knee touching the side of his leg. "He said I would see you soon. But soon never happened." She told him, turning her fork over a few times. "I thought I would go on Halloween. I had a costume."

Mike grinned at the thought of her dressing up for Halloween. "Hopper told me you were going to be a ghost." He said. "We can do something really special next year to make up for this year."

She shifted in her seat slightly. "What happened on Halloween? You said you had a bad day."

He thought back to Halloween night and how miserable the day had been. He remembered calling Eleven on his supercom and how convinced he had been that he had heard her thanks to Dustin's bad connection. "Me and my friends went to school dressed up but we were the only ones. It was really embarrassing." He began, already feeling his cheeks go red at the mere memory of the day. "Then we went out at night and Will had a pretty bad episode. I went to his house afterward and he told me about how he saw the monster."

"Halloween doesn't sound that fun." She said with a small frown.

"It usually is." Mike assured her. "It's usually the best day of the year. This one was just not so great." He bumped his leg against hers. "Next year we can wear really cool costumes and watch scary movies and eat a lot of candy."

She perked up slightly, a smile once again spreading on her face. "Can we go to the theatre?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah of course."

Hopper's footsteps reappeared from down the hall and soon he was standing in the living room once again with his shoes on. He reached over to a police radio Mike hadn't noticed and turned the volume knob all the way up, then pointed a finger at Eleven. "I'm expecting a

sixty second reply." He said, his tone sounding almost jokingly stern.

"Yes sir." Eleven replied with what Mike was pretty sure was sarcasm.

He crossed the room and ruffled Eleven's already crazy curls before taking a step back and looking between them. "You're *sure* you guys will be okay by yourselves? Last night was pretty crazy, if you need someone else here just say the word."

Mike looked at Eleven, who definitely had a more stressful night than he had. He still had no idea what had gone on at the lab and although he was incredibly curious to find out he didn't plan on asking her if there was a chance she wasn't ready. For someone that had just revisited their own personal hell she seemed pretty chipper.

Eleven spared a glance at him before answering Hopper. "I'm fine." She said, sounding incredibly sincere. "You can go."

He held his hands up and started toward the door. "Alright, fine, I'm going." He said, grabbing his jacket off a hook next to the door before reaching for the handle. "But you two better be decent when I get back."

Warmth engulfed Mike's face and he looked down at his plate while the front door opened and shut. Hopper's footsteps, the sound of leaves and twigs crunching under his shoes, faded away as he got farther from the cabin. Mike's mind flashed back to the hours he had spent alone with her in her basement, where they would talk about everything and nothing with such few words. She was so different from the scared little girl that he had found in the woods, yet the same dimple scooped in her cheek when she smiled at him.

"The day is boring here." She said, pushing her now empty plate away from her and resting her elbows on the table. "Work is longer than school. Not as much to do here as your house."

"Have you ever gotten to leave?" Mike asked, suddenly aware of just how small the cabin was and trying to imagine spending almost an entire year inside the walls.

"Sometimes I go outside when he's home. But only on the porch." She

sighed quietly and gazed out the window above the sink. "I hope I get to leave soon."

"You will." He reached for her hand and laced his fingers through hers. "And I'll come visit you during the day so you won't get bored."

Eleven looked back at him and smiled wide enough for her teeth to show and her dimple to appear. "Really?"

"Yeah of course." Mike said. "I'll come straight over after school every day if you want me to."

She smiled even wider before scooting her chair closer to him and wrapping her arms around his neck. Mike turned towards her and wrapped his arms around her waist, the side of his head resting against hers. He had longed for her all year and dreamed so many times of getting to see her once again that he wasn't entirely convinced that he wasn't dreaming.

"I missed you." She said, turning her head to rest her forehead against his neck. "I was scared if I had to wait to see you too long you would forget about me."

"I would never forget about you." Mike said immediately. "Even if I had to wait five years to see you I still wouldn't forget about you."

"I didn't want you to not know it was me. I have hair now."

Mike smiled, gently pulling at one of her curls. "Yeah. I like it though."

She pulled away, her arms still around his neck, and bit down on her lower lip. Though he could tell she was suddenly worried about something she still looked adorable. "Are you sure?" she asked, sounding uncertain. "About that girl?"

"About Max? Absolutely." He pushed one of the longer curls that hung in her face to the side. "I didn't even really want her around. But I don't know, she's alright. She came to check on me last night before you got back."

A flicker of something he couldn't quite identify flash across her face.

"I saw her sitting with you." She said quietly.

"Yeah, she made me feel better because I was so worried about you." He thought back to what Max had said about her family and was once again baffled that she was the only one to figure out why he was so bothered by her addition to the party after knowing about Eleven for a day. She was definitely more observant than he gave her credit for. "I thought they were trying to replace you so I was really mean to her. I was being stupid."

"You think I can see them soon?" she asked, looking hopeful once more.

"Yeah, of course." He said. "Do you have a phone? Do you wanna call them?"

Eleven nodded and pushed her chair out, crossing the room and going over to a phone Mike hadn't noticed on the wall close to the police radio. As she went through the mess in the living room she frowned down at it and mumbled something about cleaning it up to herself. Mike picked up the receiver, dialing Dustin's number first. He and Eleven pressed their heads together so they could both listen at the same time.

The line rang a few times before background noise crackled in the speaker, followed by Dustin's voice. "Hello?"

"It's Mike." He said, glancing at Eleven who now wore a wide smile. "Did my mom buy it last night?"

"Yeah, she seemed pretty distracted so it kind of went right over her head." Dustin said. "How's Eleven?"

She leaned in closer so she could speak into the phone. "I'm okay."

From the other line Dustin let out a sigh of relief. "Okay, good."

He gushed on the phone about how cool her entrance was the night before and how glad they all were that she was back. Eleven mostly listened with a smile on her face as he told her about all the things they would do once she was able to leave the house. Once they got off the phone with Dustin they called Lucas and had an almost

identical conversation all over again. Twenty minutes later Mike hung the phone back up on the wall and turned to face Eleven who was looking down at the mess they stood next to.

"You don't have to help clean." she said. "I made the mess."

"Of course I'll help." Mike insisted.

She didn't require much persuading. First they put the boxes of old newspaper articles back in the crawl space under the floor. Something in her body language changed, became tenser, when they started picking up the papers. He didn't have the chance to read one of them to try and figure out what might have been upsetting her. Once all the boxes were put away she lifted the furniture in the air with her mind while he swept up the glass underneath.

"What happened that you were so upset?" Mike asked as he swept underneath the floating couch.

"It was when I went to school." She said quietly. "When I came back he started yelling, and I yelled, and he called me a brat."

A frown settled on his face and he stepped out of the way so she could set the couch back down. "Why?"

"Said I needed to learn consequences." She crossed her arms and flopped down on the couch once it was back on the floor.

Mike came over and sat down next to her, leaning his arm against the back of the couch and facing her. "Are you still mad at him?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "A little." She pulled her legs up and turned towards him. "He lied about mamma. Told me she was gone."

"Hopper told me about her." Mike said. "He told me that she was sick."

Eleven nodded, her hand reaching for his and her head leaning against his arm. "Papa hurt her because she wanted me back."

Mike could tell that whatever had happened from the time she left the house to when she showed up at the Byers was sitting heavily

with her. Her gaze became somewhat far away when she started talking about her mom and she seemed like a reflection of the scared girl in his basement from last year. A totally different side of her than the one that was ready to face off the Mind Flayer the night before.

"I met someone else too." She said, tilting her head up to look at him. "Sister."

He had to keep his mouth from dropping open. "You have a sister?"

She nodded. "Mamma had a paper about her and I found her in the city. But she was... different."

"Different."

"She was in the city with other people who went after men from the lab. They kill them."

Mike tried to think of Eleven hanging around with someone who killed for the sake of revenge alone. Even thinking about her getting mixed up with such people made his heart start to pound. What if they tried to get her to do the same? If she stayed with them too long would she have? "I'm glad you came home." He said, only expressing a fraction of the thoughts running through his head.

She picked her head up again, a smile replacing the solemn expression on her face. "Me too."

Eleven inched towards him on the couch and Mike felt his heartbeat start to race. The expression she wore was one familiar to him. He had seen it the night she came back home after the interaction with Troy and they were alone and before she left with Hopper to go back to the lab. Everything in him itched to hold her, his lips longed to kiss her. But he was well aware that she might not fully understand how important something like that was. Though he never once regretting kissing her at the school he forced himself to hold back and let her make a move if she wanted to.

She stopped moving towards him on the couch when their knees touched and the distance between them was only a few inches. Her eyes fluttered shut only a moment before she closed the gap between



them and pressed her lips against his. Fireworks went off inside him and he felt every cell in his body short circuit. Her eyelashes tickled his nose and he could feel her curly bangs brushed against his forehead.

The kiss only lasted seconds but Mike still felt like he was on cloud nine. When she pulled away he could feel a wide and probably dorky grin take over his entire face. Eleven let out a quiet laugh that sounded like heaven and he knew if he died right there he would have died happy.

Neither of them said much afterwards. They never really needed to. They held onto each others hands, fingers playing with the others sleeve, and wordlessly smiled at each other. The minutes ticked passed and he would have been happy sitting there with her forever. Out of nowhere a light beeping sound came from the other side of the room that he didn't identify as the police scanner until she got up and walked over to it.

She picked up the receiver and held it up to her lips. "I'm here." She said, leaning against the wall and looking at Mike from across the room.

"Good. You kids better be behaving yourselves." Hopper's voice said from the small speaker. Mike watched her roll her eyes while her cheeks turned pink. "Did you clean up?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm on my way, I'll be back in ten minutes."

She set the receiver down and came back over to the couch, hanging her head over the side and crossing her legs underneath herself. "I want it to be you and me more."

Mike ran his fingers through her hair, pushing it back off her forehead so he could see her better. "I'm not leaving as soon as he comes back. And I'm coming over tomorrow whether you want me to or not."

She reached up and grabbed his hand, squeezing it lightly. "I want you

to."

"Good."

They talked about everything they wanted to do in the future while they waited for Hopper to get back. He told her about all the movies he wanted to show her and all the places around town he would take her once she was allowed out. Mike promised that as soon as he was able to talk about her to people who hadn't met her last November he would never be able to shut up about his amazing girlfriend. She told him that she wanted to meet more people so she could have more people to talk about him with, which he was sure wasn't the only reason but he appreciated.

When Hopper walked through the door they both perked up and bombarded him with questions about Will. He assured them that he was fine, mostly resting, and that he had asked about both of them. He took the armchair next to the couch and fiddled with his hands in his lap.

"So," he began, his gaze fixed somewhere between them, "now that things are different we're going to have to set some ground rules."

"Now?" Eleven asked, already sounding annoyed.

"No, not now." He answered. "Now he has to call home and ask what time he can stay until because I'm not planning on getting in trouble with his family."

While Mike called his house number he was vaguely aware of Hopper and Eleven chatting quietly behind him. Though he was incredibly tempted to listen in he did his best to tune them out and press the phone close to his ear. It rang longer than usual, considering his mom was either on the phone or near the phone, before it finally picked up. "Hello?"

"Nancy?"

"Mike thank *god*." His sister breathed. "What's going on, is everything alright."

"I'm fine." He said, already fed up with her worrying. She had just

stopped being a helicopter sister when Halloween rolled around. If the depression that settled inside him at the end of last November wasn't enough Nancy had seen just what they had faced in the school and became overprotective in a way she had never been before. "I was just calling to check with mom what time I should come home."

"Soon, preferably." She said. "I'm worried about you, Mike. I just need to see that you're okay."

"I'm fine. I'm with Eleven." He told her in hopes of communicating how much he didn't want to go home.

"Yeah, I know, but just come home soon please? Last night was... a lot."

It took Mike a moment to realize that he and Eleven weren't the only ones who'd had a hard night. Nancy had gone with the Byers to exorcise Will and he could only begin to imagine what that was like. He'd barely even spoken to anyone else once Eleven came back. Including Nancy. He was suddenly overcome with guilt in the same way he had when he spoke to Max on the front steps of the Byers' house.

"Yeah, alright." He said after a moment had passed and he gained some clarity. "I'll come home soon."

"Okay. Come straight to my room when you get here."

"Okay."

They said their goodbyes before he hung up the phone and Mike returned to his spot next to Eleven on the couch. He told Hopper that his sister wanted him home soon, already regretting saying goodbye to Eleven. The room fell silent again and, even with Hopper sitting across from them, his hand was itching to hold onto hers.

"Alright, let's talk." Hopper said before things got too awkward. "I'm going to be lenient with you two because I trust you and you guys were alone for a week and managed to survive." He leaned his elbows on his knees. "But I can't let you guys do whatever you want."

Eleven pulled her knees to her chest with a quiet groan.

"You guys can see each other often as long as it doesn't get in the way of other things." He turned more towards Mike. "At some point we're going to have to tell your parents about you two so they can be in the know." It was then Mike's turn to groan. "And when they do know I'll be in contact with them to make sure that you don't get distracted with school."

"I won't." Mike said, though he wasn't sure how true it is.

"And it won't be so common that you two are alone together." Hopper continued. "I gave you a pass today because of what happened yesterday. But you guys are just kids and you need to be supervised."

Though it would have been nice if they were able to do whatever they wanted Mike knew that was incredibly unlikely. As long as he was able to see her regularly he would be fine with the situation. He was just glad that she was back in his life again. It was all he'd wanted for almost a year. Now that he had her back he almost didn't know what to do with himself.

"I'm sure you got lots of homework to make up after everything so why don't I drive you back now?"

Mike wanted to ask for more time but he knew that Nancy was worried, and if he didn't leave then he might never have. He nodded his head and before either of them had the chance to stand Eleven spoke up. "I'm coming too."

Mike couldn't tell if Hopper even planned on trying to argue with her on the matter. Either way he nodded and told her to put her shoes on. She practically jumped off the couch and ran into her bedroom, coming out less than a minute later with sneakers and a bright smile on. Her hand grabbed onto his as they followed Hopper out the door and down the steps. He heard her take a deep breath of the fresh air and tried to imagine, once again, being stuck in a small and stuffy cabin for almost a year.

When they reached the truck they climbed in the backseat. As they drove to his house Mike told her about some of the things she had missed during the year. How Will had wanted to meet her so badly after all the stories they told him about her, that Troy had stopped

picking on him and his friends as much ever since that day in the gym, and that he hadn't taken down her blanket fort.

His stomach sank to the floor when Hopper's truck parked in his driveway. Mike dug through his pockets and found a scrap of paper before reaching for the pen in the dashboard and using his leg as a surface to lean against. He scribbled down his phone number as legibly as he could before handing it to Eleven. "You can call me whenever you want. You remember what time I get home from school?"

"Three-one-five."

"Yeah, right." He said. "And if someone else answers just tell them you wanna talk to me and I'll pick up the phone."

She offered him a small smile but he could still tell she was dreading saying goodbye as much as he was. "Okay."

He locked his arms around her waist and pressed his head against hers, not caring at all that Hopper was sitting only inches away from them. There were hundreds of things sitting at the tip of his tongue begging to jump out into the air and tell her, but he managed to keep them inside and just hug her.

Mike only pulled away when he heard her snuffle so he could make sure she wasn't crying. Though he could see tears forming in her eyes they seemed determined to stay put. He squeezed her hand one last time before reluctantly grabbing the door handle and hopping out of the car and heading up the walkway to his front door. At the sound of the engine roaring to life he turned back around in time to see Eleven sitting in the front seat with her face pressed against the window before the car drove off down the street.

A paranoid worry made itself at home in his mind as he opened his front door and stepped inside. A worry that the moment they were separated something awful would happen to her and they would once again be kept from her. The best he could do to console himself was say that she was only going back to Hopper's cabin and try to ignore all the ways his mind counter argued.

When he reached Nancy's room he spotted her sitting on her bed with her blankets wrapped around her shoulders and her eyes closed. He knocked on the open door and her eyes immediately snapped open. She pulled her legs closer to her to make room for him at the end of the bed. Mike sat facing her, his hands in his lap and his leg bouncing up and down.

"How's Johnathan?" he asked, an indirect way of asking if his suspicions of the change between his and Nancy's relationship were true.

"He's alright." She answered, leaning back against her headboard. "Probably glad to have Will back to normal. I was thinking of going to visit them tonight or tomorrow morning. Do you wanna come?"

"Yeah sure."

She started picking at a loose thread on her comforter. "How is she?"

There was no need for her to explain who she was talking about. Even thinking about Eleven while being separated from her once more made his throat start to burn and his eyes begin to water. He looked down at his hands, determined not to cry. "She's okay." He said quietly.

"Are you okay?" she asked, moving towards him.

Mike didn't know how to answer. He was beyond relieved that she was alive and close by and he felt like complaining about anything would have been selfish. But he didn't think he'd ever be fully relaxed without her in his sight. No one who worked in the lab when she was there had been seen in months. But that didn't mean that they weren't out there looking for her. What if one day she was in danger and being taken away and he was completely clueless sitting at school.

The mere thought made the first tear escape and start to roll down his cheek. Mike quickly wiped it away in hopes of preventing Nancy from seeing it but she had a good eye and quickly pulled him into a hug. For once he let her fuss over him.

"I can't lose her again." He said, his voice stuffy as he began crying

for the third time in 24 hours. "I just can't."

"You're not going to lose her." she said, rubbing his back in an attempt to soothe him. "Hopper's cabin is less than fifteen minutes away. And I saw a phone there."

Mike wiped his wet cheeks with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "But what if something happens? What if someone finds out about her and they take her away?"

Nancy hesitated for a moment, likely thinking of the best way to word her response to calm him down. "That's not gonna happen. Only ten people in town know about her. And they all care about her. We're all gonna keep her safe, okay? You're not the only one looking out for her."

Though her words made sense the emotional part of his brain didn't fully believe her. He'd seen first hand how quickly and easily she could slip away from his life. But he didn't want to talk about the possibility of that awful night repeating itself so he wrapped his arms around his sister and cried until his body was unable to make any more tears.

### 3. Chapter 3

back at it again not proofreading chapters before I upload them. I hope you like this story and are glad I'm continuing this because I think I know what direction I want to take it in.

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"Mike! Mike wake *up*!"

Mike bolted upright in bed, the images of him and Eleven kissing from his dream quickly fading away and being replaced by Nancy standing over him with a set jaw and annoyed expression. She tossed the pillow she had just hit him with back on the bed next to him and gave him one last shove.

"Are we going to the Byers house or not?"

He looked over at his alarm clock and quickly figured out that he'd been too distracted to set his alarm. In the middle of dinner the phone had rang and he practically knocked his chair over on his way to answer it. He and Eleven had talked on the phone until they were both half asleep and struggled to speak clearly. The headache he always got whenever he didn't sleep well washed over him as he tossed the blankets aside and got to his feet.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going. Sorry."

Nancy crossed her arms across her chest as he went over to his dresser and dug through his clothes for something to wear. "You guys were on the phone for *hours*."

"We had some catching up to do."

"It's kind of adorable."

He looked over his shoulder at her. "I hope that means you weren't listening in."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Only to see if you were still on the phone."



Mike groaned and started to push her out of her room. When she reached the doorway she turned to face him and planted herself in place before he could close the door on her. "I'm really glad you have her back. When she was gone you were so... I can tell you really care about her."

He was already uncomfortable at the mention of what was easily the worst year of his life. Nothing seemed quite as important as it once had when he knew that she was out there somewhere, possibly scared or hurt. Family, school, socializing, even the D&D campaign had all become lackluster.

"Yeah." He replied shortly.

Nancy raised an eyebrow at him. "Do you think you... love her?"

"Yeah." He saw her face light up with excitement and he quickly shoved her out into the hallway before she could start gushing about how cute he and Eleven were. "I have to get dressed."

He shut the door and locked it for good measure. Once he turned back towards his room his eyes were instantly drawn to the Demogorgon figurine from his D&D set. They had all agreed that it was best to take that specific monster out of the equation and do their best to work around it. There were few things he had left to remember Eleven by. She was the one who had figured out the Demogorgon and the Upside Down. So while the figurine wasn't in use he kept it on his night stand to remind him not only how amazing she really was but that she was real.

Mike got dressed and hurried downstairs, eager to check up on Will and see how he was doing. He got in the passenger's seat of Nancy's car and his leg started to bounce up and down as she pulled out of the driveway and onto the street. Though he'd heard from Hopper that Will was doing better he was still anxious to see for himself the progress that had been made since the exorcism of the Mind Flayer.

A few blocks away from his house Nancy turned down the radio and Mike could sense a *talk* coming. "What you said before, about Eleven, did you mean that."

He meant it with every fiber of his being. But talking about it with Nancy made his stomach ache with embarrassment. Not that he was embarrassed about Eleven, but Nancy was just so *much* sometimes. He shrugged his shoulders and muttered a short "I don't know."

"Have you told her?"

"No." he admitted. "I don't know if she understands that it's a really big deal. And if she does I don't wanna put her in an uncomfortable situation where she feels forced to say something she doesn't mean."

Nancy glanced at him before she had to look back at the road. "Do you think she doesn't feel the same way?"

Mike let out a short sigh, taking a moment to think over his reply before he said it. He hadn't really taken the time to think about telling her how he felt because he hadn't had the opportunity to in so long. Part of him wanted to tell her so that if, god forbid, something did happen she wouldn't ever doubt how he felt about her. But he didn't want to do anything to make her uncomfortable.

"I know that she feels something for me." He eventually answered. "But I don't know if she feels *that*. Or if she fully understands what love is."

"Maybe you should have someone talk to her about it for you." She suggested. "That way you'll know if she gets it without having to bring it up to her yourself."

"Are you offering?"

"Do you want me to?"

"... I'll let you know."

He must have been incredibly desperate to consider enlisting Nancy for help with his love life.

When they pulled up to the Byers house he spotted Joyce on the front porch smoking a cigarette. His mind flashed back to the lab, forcing him to relive the last moments of Bob's life. He'd met Bob quite a few times in his and Joyce's four month relationship and though they

never knew each other particularly well he had always been fond of him. He wanted to hug Joyce or offer up some sort of condolence, but he didn't want to bring it up if she had the luxury of not thinking about Bob already.

She stomped out her cigarette when Mike and Nancy got out of the car, offering them smiles that didn't quite reach her eyes before opening the front door for them. Mike noticed almost immediately after stepping inside that most of Will's drawings of the Upside Down had been taken down and the blankets that had been brought in from Will's room for Eleven had been put back. Johnathan came in from the kitchen to give Nancy a hug and ask Mike how he and Eleven were doing.

"Will's in his room." Joyce said when Mike started nervously fidgeting in place. "He just got up a little while ago."

He thanked her before hurrying down to hall to Will's open bedroom door. He spotted Will sitting at his desk still dressed in pajama's almost immediately. Though Mike knocked on the open door softly his friend still jumped and whipped around to see who was behind him. A look of relief crossed over Will's face.

"How are you feeling?" Mike asked as he sat down on the end of Will's bed.

He turned in his chair to face him. "Different. Better." He answered. "It's like I didn't even realize how much space the Mind Flayer had taken up in my body until it was gone. I feel... lighter now."

"That's good."

"Yeah." Will pulled the sleeves of his sweatshirt over his hands. "I remember everything but it's not super clear. It will come in flashes but out of context it doesn't really make sense."

"Maybe that's better." Mike offered. "Remember everything super vivid might be harder to deal with."

Will nodded a few times, silently thinking over what Mike said. "I heard about Eleven." He said after a moment passed and he seemed

to come back to reality. "I bet you're glad."

Mike couldn't help but smile. "Yeah." He said. "I got to see her for a little while yesterday. She's the same but a little different. Her hair grew out and her vocabulary is better."

"I want to meet her." Will said, resting his arm across the back of the chair and his chin on his arm. "After everything she's done for all of us, getting me out of the Upside Down... it's weird I've never met her before. I've heard so much about her."

"Maybe we can all go visit her sometime." Mike suggested. "I think it's going to be a little while before she can go outside again so she'll probably need the company."

A silence fell over the room, one that wasn't uncomfortable. The same heaviness was in the air that he had felt last November once the relief of Will being rescued from the Upside Down had subsided. Everyone had seen things they never imagined they would in their wildest dreams and no one quite knew what to do with himself. Mike couldn't help but wonder if the Demogorgon Dustin had insisted on keeping for scientific purposes was still in the refrigerator. He seriously doubted it.

He could only begin to imagine what was on Will's mind. He had arguably gone through more than anyone. They had all had a break for the past year. Will had been dealing with the effects of the Upside Down constantly the whole time. Mike wondered if he has always been struggling but had played it down for the sake of his loved ones. It seemed like the kind of thing Will would do.

From down the hall they could hear the phone ringing and both turned to look at the door. They could just barely hear Joyce's voice when she answered the call. "A lot of people have been calling." Will said. "Bob's boss called before because he didn't show up to work today. Mom didn't say anything because... you know, what can she say?"

Mike's stomach churned at the image of the Demogorgons tearing away at Bob's flesh, the sound of gunshots and Joyce's screams echoing in his ears. Will had been much closer to Bob and though he

teased him Mike could tell by the look on his face that he was taking the loss hard. "Hopper will figure out something. A way to tell people." He said, though he doubted it helped much.

"Yeah, I know." Will said, nodding a few times. "It's just... it shouldn't be a cover story, like with Barbra. People should know what really happened."

Barbra, who Mike had seen multiple times a week for years and was his favorite of Nancy's friends, was a name that lived like a ghost in the Wheeler house. Her pictures were still up in Nancy's room but no one had the courage to say her name. Their parents didn't even know just how badly Nancy needed to be consoled. They talked about hope, how she'd yet to be found and there was still a chance, but she and Mike knew the truth. It was similar to how his friends had avoided talking about Eleven, all of them knowing how much her absence hurt him and no one having the guts to say what they were all thinking; that she might not even be out there anymore.

Joyce's footsteps came from down the hall until she poked her head in the doorway. "Hey honey," she said, "it's Lucas on the line. He wants to know if he and Dustin and Max can come over and see how you're doing."

Will glanced at Mike, silently asking if it was okay. He nodded and Will turned towards his mom. "Yeah, okay." Once Joyce disappeared Will faced Mike once again. "You sure about Max? I can tell Lucas not to let her come."

"No, it's okay." Mike assured him. "After everything happened we kind of talked for a while. She's not so bad."

Will dropped his jaw open in a dramatic look of shock. "*Not so bad?* Who are you and what have you done with Mike?"

He laughed and lightly kicked the leg of his chair. "Shut up." He said. "I was outside freaking out about Eleven so she came out to see if I was okay. I was so... angry about everything all the time. Now that she's back I get how stupid I was being."

"You weren't being stupid."

"Yeah, I am." Mike said. "It's okay to say it, I know I was."

Will shook his head, "You weren't being stupid, you were depressed. We all get it, no one's mad at you or anything."

Mike looked down at his hands, feeling embarrassed about his own actions. "Maybe. But how I was with Max wasn't cool. I just... I thought they were trying to replace Eleven with her."

"They would never do that." Will said immediately.

"Yeah, I know that now." Mike replied. "But, I don't know, I just didn't want them to forget about her."

Will sighed and got to his feet. "Why don't we wait for them outside. I'm dying for some fresh air."

Mike agreed and followed him outside. Though the half open door to Johnathan's room he could see him and Nancy sitting on his bed with their arms around each other. The sight made him nauseous and at the same time miss Eleven. When they got outside and sat on the front steps Mike spotted a patch of newly dug dirt and assumed it was a grave for the Demogorgon Dustin had insisted on keeping. He glanced over at Will who had his arms wrapped around himself.

"You okay?" Mike asked, bumping his shoulder with his.

After a moment Will returned to the present and he nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I will be." He answered. "It's just... hard. I might not be in school on Monday. I think I just need some time."

He didn't blame him. "No problem. I can come keep you company after school until you come back."

Will smiled, "Don't you wanna go spend time with your girlfriend after school?"

"Yeah," Mike said, "but I also wanna spend time with my best friend. I'll make it work."

"If you say so."

They exchanged stories about Bob while they waited for their friends to show up. The more they talked the more Mike felt as if he should have done something to save him. What exactly he could have done he wasn't quite sure. But there had to be something they could have done different for Bob to come out of the lab alive. He had stepped up to the plate to help them figure out the mystery of Will's now-memories without even realizing what he was getting into and how much he was helping.

Almost fifteen minutes after they sat outside Steve's car pulled into the driveway and stopped behind Nancy's car. They were hardly on their feet when the doors open and Dustin, Lucas, and Max jumped out and came running over. Each of them gave Will a hug and started bombarding him with questions about how he was doing that he did his best to answer. They started to head inside but Max grabbed the sleeve of Mike's sweatshirt to stop him.

"How is she?" she asked and he, just like he had with Nancy, knew exactly who she was talking about.

"She's okay. Antsy to get out of the house." He told her.

Max smiled a little. "That's good." She said. "And how are you? Better?"

Mike nodded, "Yeah, definitely." He told her. "Listen thanks for, you know, talking to me the other night. It really helped me out."

She waved him off and started for the front door. "It's no problem." She said, dismissing his thanks. "Don't worry about it."

"No, really." Mike said, stopping her as she had him only moments ago. "I haven't exactly been nice to you and you still tried to help me."

"You thought they were replacing her, I get it." Max said, saying almost exactly what Will had before. "You don't have to feel bad about it or anything."

"Yeah but I do." Mike told her. "I'm not usually like that. Or I wasn't before- you know."

"Well I'm not exactly an angel either, Wheeler." She said with a short laugh. "Why don't we just agree to start over and be friends."

Mike let out a short sigh of relief. Though he hadn't expected her to do anything more than put up with him after the way he'd treated her he was glad she was willing to put the past week behind her. "That sounds good."

They quickly caught up to their friends who were on their way to the back yard. Most of the contents of the Byers shed had been put back and all that remained were enough chairs for them to sit in and what Will said they were throwing out off to the side. Once they were all settled in they talked about everything under the sun other than what had happened. They complained about how much homework they had to catch up on and all confessed none of them had started to yet, made plans for thanksgiving break, laughed over the Halloween costume incident, and brainstormed ways to keep Eleven from going stir crazy.

Things were far from feeling back to normal. The events of the past week was as obvious as a full grown Demogorgon sitting inside the circle of chairs. Any time they got too close to discussing the events that had transpired the air turned awkward and they all struggled to find a way to shift the conversation focus. The closest they came was Max telling them that Billy had, for the most part, left her alone aside from some glared when they passed one another in the hallway. But they all had a good laugh when she told them he was still bloodied up from his fight with Steve.

They were outside for hours, Mike hadn't realized how long they'd been talking until Nancy came out the back door and told him that their mom had called looking for them. He said goodbye to everyone before following her out to the car.

"What does she want now?" Mike asked, only half joking, as Nancy pulled out of the driveway.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I have no idea." She admitted. "She didn't sound happy, though."

"She's angry?"



Nancy shook her head. "No, she sounded... upset. Sad. I figured we'd better not push it and get home before she totally freaks out."

It didn't take long for them to get home. When they walked through the door they spotted their mom with Holly in her lap and a faraway expression on. She snapped out of it when the front door closed behind them and she quickly set Holly down before coming over and giving each of them a hug, starting with Nancy. Mike hadn't seen her that way since the day Will's fake body had been found.

"Mom what's going on?" Nancy asked when Karen finally let her go and settled for putting her hands on her shoulders.

"Chief Hopper called." She said with a short snuffle. For a moment Mike panicked that something had happened to Eleven until she continued. "It's about Barbra, sweetie."

"Barb?" Nancy's voice came out barely above a whisper.

Karen nodded, a loose hair from her ponytail falling in her face. "He said to call him back when you got home. I think it's best if he tells you, he knows more than I do."

She glanced at Mike, her brows pulled together and her eyes filling with tears, in a silent request for her to come with her. They went upstairs and into her room, sitting next to one another on her bed while she dialed the local police station number with shaky fingers. Mike leaned in slightly and did his best to listen in. Flo, the station secretary, transferred them to Hopper and soon a familiar voice came from the other line.

"Hopper."

"It's Nancy Wheeler." Mike could tell that she was struggling to keep her voice loud enough for him to hear through the phone. "My mom told me you called her about Barb."

He heard Hopper clear his throat before he replied. "After everything that happened at the lab... I figured out a cover story for her that's not so far away from the truth. Something about experiments involving hazardous toxins leaking into the ground. As soon as I find

out a way to cover up why we don't have a body it'll be put in a police report."

"Oh."

"I just wanted to make sure you're okay with... all of this."

Nancy hesitated and Mike watched her face to try and figure out what she was thinking. "Yeah." She said after a moment. "It's okay. Her parents took out a mortgage on the house to hire a private investigator."

"Yeah, I heard."

"Maybe you shouldn't be the one to tell them." She suggested. "They're not so thrilled with you right now."

"I know."

They were both silent, not sure what to say. Mike debated doing something to comfort her. Should he hug her? Give her space? Before he got the chance to decide Nancy cleared her throat quietly. "Alright, well, thank you. I'll, um, talk to you later."

After she hung up the phone her eyes glazed over and she seemed to disappear within herself. Mike sat next to her unsure of what to do. He wasn't the best on comforting people but no one else in the house was much better. His first instinct was to find the bright side of the situation, but what wasn't always what someone needed. He had a feeling that was definitely not what Nancy needed. Mike put his hand on her shoulder after a minute or two passed to get her attention. "Nance?"

She seemed to wake up, straightening her posture and wiping at her cheek where an unnoticed tear was. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." She said, giving him a smile that didn't quite convince him. "You should go call your girlfriend she probably misses you."

"She can wait a little while." He said, though the mere mention of Eleven made him antsy to talk to her again. "Are you okay?"

Nancy nodded though her gaze was already starting to slip away

again. "I'm okay, Mike." She told him. "Barb has been dead almost a year. I've been working on grieving for a while."

"Yeah, but, this is a big deal." He argued. A Wheeler family trait they had both been given from their mother was stubbornness. "I mean, no one else knows. Once they do it's gonna, like, reopen the wound."

She sighed and pushed his shoulder. "Mike. I'm *fine*." She said, "How about this? You'll be the first to know when I need consoling."

Mike lingered before giving in and standing up. He knew all about pushing people away when they were trying to help and he simply didn't want to talk about it. But he also knew that he couldn't make her talk if she didn't want to. "Alright." He said as he headed for the door. "Don't let mom get on the phone."

She laughed, "I'll go distract her."

He went down the hall into his room, closing the door and putting the radio on softly to drown out his voice from anyone who might be nearby. From his pocket he pulled out the number that Joyce had given him for Hopper's cabin. His stomach turned into a butterfly bush as he punched in the number and did summersaults as he leaned against his headboard and listened to the line ring. And ring. And ring. Just when he started to debate hanging up and calling later the ringing stop and, if he listened close enough, he could hear breathing.

"El?

"Mike?" he heard her let out a sigh of relief. "I didn't know who it was."

"Did I scare you?"

"A little." She admitted. "What are you doing?"

"I was just at Will's house. He's doing better. He said he wants to meet you really bad."

"I want to meet him too. When he's awake."

Mike smiled and pulled his knees to his chest. The constant anxiety that had been in the back of his mind since he watched Hoppers car disappear down the street started to melt away at the sound of her voice. "I think you'll like him. He kind of reminds me of you."

"Why?"

He shrugged even though she couldn't see him. "I don't know how to explain it. I guess you'll see. What did you do today?"

"Watch movies."

"Which ones?"

She hummed as she tried to remember. "Sixteen Candles, Carrie, and Grease."

"Which one was your favorite?"

"Sixteen Candles. I've already seen Grease and Carrie was boring."

Mike laughed at the irony. "You do realize that Carrie and you have a lot in common?"

"That's why it was boring."

For a few minutes they were quiet, both listening to the sound of the other person breathing and the radio on the other side of his room. Even when they weren't in the same room they didn't need words to communicate. It was like he knew what she was thinking; that she wanted to be next to him just as badly as he did.

"Hey Mike?"

"Hm?"

"Have you ever had a girlfriend before?"

"No." he said, trying his best to not be embarrassed about it. "I don't think a girl has ever even liked me before."

"Liar."

"I'm not lying."

He heard her laugh on the other line. "I don't believe you."

"Fine. Ask Dustin and Lucas, they'll tell you."

"I will."

"Hey Eleven?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm really, really happy you're okay."

"Me too."

Admitting that he was in love with Eleven earlier made him tempted to admit it to her. But he bit his tongue and asked her something else, knowing that she might not be ready for something like that

## 4. Chapter 4

Monday morning Mike woke up not so bright and not so early. He trudged through his house like a zombie on his way to breakfast. Even after taking a shower he still felt a weight pulling him down to the floor. Or back to his bed. He knew that staying on the phone with Eleven so long was a bad idea considering how much homework he had to catch up on. But neither of them had been able to hang up until he heard Hopper in the background inform her that dinner was ready. Even then they took five whole minutes to say goodbye.

When he stepped out his front door and turned to get his bike he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Hopper's police van parked at the end of his driveway. Anxiety bubbled up in his stomach as he wearily approached, wondering if he was there to scold him for being on the phone so long the night before. But when he reached the car Hopper flashed him a short smile (or the closest Hopper could come to a smile) before rolling down the window.

"Need a ride?" he asked.

"Uh, no." Mike admitted. "Not really."

Hopper leaned over and opened the passenger side door and Mike figured that he didn't exactly have a choice. Being both the chief of police and his girlfriend's guardian made him a bit hesitant to argue. So he climbed in next to him and planned on asking Nancy for a ride home after school.

"You look like you haven't slept in a month." Hopper commented as he pulled out of the driveway and onto the road.

"Try a year." Mike said before he thought his words through.

They drove about two blocks before either of them spoke. He began to wonder if he'd crossed some sort of line when Hopper cleared his throat. "So I was thinking about how to tell your parents about Eleven. Jane."

Mike groaned and leaned his head back against the seat. "Do we have

to?"

"Yes, we do. You can't just not tell them that she's okay and then not show up one day."

"They don't even know about her." Mike mumbled

Hopper glanced at him and Mike was just able to see his shocked expression before he looked back at the road. "They don't know?" he asked. "Who'd you talk about all this with, then?"

"I didn't talk about it." He told him. "They probably wouldn't care even if I did."

"That's not true. Of course they would care."

"I guess you don't know them that well then."

Mike was envious of people like Will and Dustin who had great relationships with their parents. They could go to their moms about anything and get support whenever they needed no matter what. In the Wheeler house no one really cared what everyone else did that day unless they were sitting at the dinner table and trying to fill the silence. He knew that Nancy tried to make up for their parents disinterest which sometimes made her a bit overbearing.

"Well we have to tell them." Hopper said. "Don't you want her to be able to be able to come over to your house."

Mike was torn between being desperate to be back in his house and reluctant to letting her and his parents interact. "Yeah." He finally answered.

"Then they need to know." They turned onto the main road and he guessed there was only a few minutes left until they got to the school. "I'm working on legally adopting her and coming up with a cover story for her but that might take some time and I don't wanna keep you guys separated any more than necessary."

"Really?"

"If you knew how difficult it was to keep her inside all the time you'd

believe me." He replied dryly. "Maybe you could tell your parents that you heard about her and that you and your friends are planning on stopping by and introducing yourselves."

"So I have to pretend like I don't know her?"

"For a little while, yes."

The idea put a bitter taste in his mouth but he knew he'd be willing to do anything if it meant they'd get to spend more time together. His imagination ran wild with all the things they could do when she was allowed to go into town just the two of them. "Will she get to go to school?"

Hopper sighed. "I don't know, kid." He said. "She can read and write but barely. And even if she got caught up by next September I don't know if she'll be prepared socially. Kids are mean, you know that. I don't know if she can handle it."

Mike held his tongue from pointing out that she had handled facing off against the Mind Flayer in stride. "We'll be there to protect her."

He held a hand up. "Alright, how about this; we wait and see where she is in September and go from there."

Hopper pulled the car into the busy parking lot and managed to find a spot not too far away from the front entrance. Mike spotted both Dustin and Lucas' bikes on the bike rack. He had no way of knowing if Will was in school or not since Joyce or Johnathan always drove him. Before he could get out of the car Hopper turned towards him. "Why don't we practice what you're going to say to your folks?"

Mike unbuckled his seatbelt and held his backpack in his lap. "Okay, um..." he took a moment to gather his words. Even thinking about having such a serious conversation with his parents made him antsy. "I really don't want to pretend like I don't know her." he said.

"Okay, how about you tell them you met her once."

He had a feeling it was the best he could do and decided to settle. "Yeah okay." Mike rubbed his hands over his eyes. "Um... we heard in school that you took custody of a girl our age so we stopped by your



place to introduce ourselves and try and be her friend."

"What's her name?"

"Jane." The name felt weird in his mouth knowing he was talking about Eleven.

"Where is she from?"

"I don't know." Mike answered. "We didn't want to cross some sort of line so we didn't ask her a lot of questions."

"That's good." He said. "I have to figure out a story for how I met her." Hopper rubbed a hand over his chin as he tried to think of more questions. Mike knew that his mom was the one he had to worry about when it came to asking for information. "Is she going to be going to school?"

"I don't know, I haven't seen her around. They might have paperwork to do before she can."

"What happened to her family?"

"We didn't ask." Mike looked over at him. "I'm not gonna slip up and say something stupid. I would never do that to her."

Hopper nodded, "Yeah, I know. I'm just trying to prepare you." He faced forward again and they both watched the front entrance of the school. After a few moments he spoke again. "Alright, go learn something."

Mike grabbed his bag and opened the car door. "I can ask Nancy for a ride home, you know."

"You'll want me to pick you up." Hopper told him. "Trust me."

Though he had no clue what Hopper meant Mike closed the car door and headed for the front doors. He tried to imagine Eleven sitting in his living room and having a conversation with his parents but a picture didn't come to mind easily. He had spent the whole week that she'd been in his house trying to hide her from his family. Mike imagined that his protective instincts would kick in if she were ever

to come over.

Once he was inside Mike went straight to Will's locker and, with a small sigh of relief, saw all three of his friends. In the mere hours since he'd been at the Byers house it was like Will had come back to life again. All of the color has returned to his skin and his smile once again reached his eyes.

"I didn't expect you to be back in school." Mike admitted once he reached his friends. "I thought you might have needed another day or two."

"Honestly I feel fine." Will told him. "I just want things to go back to normal. Did you see Eleven last night?"

"No, but I talked to her on the phone. Hopper gave me a ride to school this morning." He recapped how they talked about telling his parents about her so that she would be able to go to his house and that she would no longer be a secret. Mike told them about all the questions he would have to answer for to keep her cover from being blown. He hated that he had to lie about anything having to do with Eleven but was at the same time willing to do anything to keep her safe. "I'll probably tell them tonight."

"What are you going to tell them?" Lucas asked.

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "That we all went over to introduce ourselves when we heard about her. You guys will cover for me if my parents ever bring it up?"

"Yeah, of course." Dustin said, "We got your back, don't worry."

Their first day back to school was somewhat of a disaster when it came to focusing in class. Mike drifted from room to room in a total daze, his mind a mix of flashbacks from the last week and worrying about Eleven and Will. Though he said he felt fine Mike couldn't help but be skeptical that the normalcy would last. He had been fine the first couple weeks after he'd been rescued from the Upside Down. But then the episodes started happening in December and got so bad by January that he couldn't hide them from everyone anymore. If they started again would he once again try to keep it a secret? Would he, in

typical Will fashion, try to shield them all from the truth to prevent them from worrying?

By the end of the day they were all thoroughly exhausted simply from trying to keep up. They all sat on the benches in the front of the school while Max, Will, and Mike waited for their rides to show up. Will's eyes kept closing and Dustin had his head rested on his backpack like a pillow.

"And we have to do this again *tomorrow*?" he said, voicing what they were all thinking.

"Maybe we should skip." Max suggested, her chin propped up in her hands.

"There's no way we can all get away with skipping without getting into trouble." Lucas pointed out. Everyone deflated slightly, knowing he was right.

"It'll get easier." Will said. "Remember last year we thought we'd never be able to go back to school?"

All but Max nodded in agreement. Mike had taken an extra day or two off than everyone else, too depressed to leave the basement after Eleven was gone. In the first week without her he emerged every couple of hours to get something to eat and drink and to show his family that he was still alive down there. Even thinking about the darkness that had settled inside him made him once again start to feel bitter that Hopper had kept them apart but he did his best to push it down.

"How did you guys get back into a routine?" Max asked, not having the luxury of having already knowing how to deal with the madness that was the Upside Down.

For a moment none of them knew how to respond. Memories from the year before were foggy and had turned into one mass memory of trauma and discomfort. At least for Mike they had.

Lucas was eventually the one to speak up and answer. "We just kind of pretended everything was okay until it was. We talked about it

with the people who knew what happened but in front of everyone else we knew we didn't really have a choice other than to just be okay."

Max sat with this information for a moment, her leg starting to bounce up and down. A nervous habit Mike recognized. "What about your parents?" she then asked.

"Our parents don't know." Dustin told her. "Joyce and Hopper are the only adults who know."

She looked between all of them for confirmation, not quite believing what she was hearing. "*Really?*"

"Really. It's not just a matter of needing to talk about our feelings it's a matter of safety."

Max let out a sigh and nodded her head. "Yeah, alright, I get it. I won't tell them." She said. "I don't think Wheeler would ever forgive me if I told someone and got his girlfriend in trouble."

They all laughed, even Mike who knew just how truthful what she had said was. Will glanced out at the parking lot, likely looking for his mom's car, and turned back to Mike with a grin. "Speak of the devil, Hopper just pulled up. Look who's in the front seat."

He followed Will's gaze until he spotted Hopper's police truck near where he'd parked that morning. Mike squinted and was just able to make out a pair of brown eyes and curly hair in the distance. He grabbed his backpack and jumped to his feet. "I'll see you guys later." He said before he turned and ran across the parking lot.

Years of running from school bullies had trained him well for sprinting over to Hopper's car. Only a few years before he reached the truck he saw Eleven glance over at Hopper before throwing the car door open and jumping out with a wide smile. She started running towards him until they crashed together in the middle of the parking lot. Mike placed a kiss on the top of her head when she pressed her face against his neck. He could feel the curious eyes of his peers on their way home from school watching them but he didn't care. He wouldn't have gladly stayed there with her forever but

Hopper's car horn reminded him that it was dangerous for her to be seen and they quickly turned and climbed into the backseat.

"Told you you'd want me to pick you up." Hopper said as he pulled out of the parking space.

Eleven turned in her seat to face him, a wide smile still plastered on her face. "Were you surprised?"

"Yeah, I was really surprised." He said, mirroring her smile.

"Don't expect it every day." Hopper called over his shoulder from the front seat.

She rolled her eyes at him but he didn't notice. "How was school?"

Mike shrugged, "It was alright." He admitted, "Will was in school, which I didn't except. I had a really hard time paying attention." He watched a small frown replace her smile which made his heart squeeze. "It's okay, though. As long as I do my homework well it's okay."

"What is homework like?"

"Here, I can show you." Mike said, unzipping his backpack and pulling out the folder he kept his homework in. He opened it up and pulled out his math homework. "I just have to answer all these answers. A lot of people don't like math but I don't think it's so bad."

She held the paper closer to her face and stared at the numbers and equations. "You're smart." Eleven said. "This looks hard."

"Well, yeah, it's hard if you don't know how to do it." Mike said. "But I've been doing math for years. You'll know how to do this one day."

Another frown appeared on her face as she handed the paper back to him. "No I won't." she grumbled.

"Of course you will. I can teach you how to do it."

Her face lit up slightly, the corners of her frown twitching upwards. "Really?"

"If you want me to, yeah."

She wrapped her hand around his, giving it a light squeeze. They sat in silence for a few blocks, simply enjoying each other's company and saving things they didn't want to say in front of Hopper for that night's phone call. When they pulled into his neighborhood Hopper glanced over his shoulder at them. "You gonna talk to your parents tonight?"

"Yeah." Mike said reluctantly. "What if they talk to other people about her?"

"Tell them not to mention it to anyone else since I'm still trying to get the adoption sorted out and I don't wanna stress her out."

Eleven tugged at his hand gently to get his attention. "Long talk about it last night." She said when he looked over at her. "Same thing again and again."

"You've got lines to practice too, young lady, before you start meeting anyone else." He said.

She made an annoyed face. "Working on it." She grumbled.

"Who's working on it?"

"*I'm* working on it."

Though she was clearly annoyed by Hopper's corrections Mike felt himself swelling with pride at how much she had changed in a year. Her vocabulary and grammar was worlds better than it had been before. She'd developed a sense of humor and a sharp tongue he had a feeling had gotten her in trouble more than once. The once scared little girl that had escaped from hell was now a fierce teenager that he felt himself falling in love with all over again. She was nothing short of brilliant.

It was all too soon that Hopper had pulled up in front of his house and turned to face them once he killed the engine. Next to him he saw Eleven deflate slightly, knowing that she was feeling the same disappointment that their time together was once again coming to an end. The driveway was empty with his father still at work, Nancy still

at school, and his mom likely picking Holly up from daycare. It would be so easy for Eleven to come inside for just a few moments. And by the way she leaned forward and looked out the window at his house longingly he figured she was thinking the same thing.

Hopper seemed to have read their expressions by the way he said "soon, but not yet."

Eleven didn't seem satisfied. "Soon doesn't mean anything." She said quietly. But in the closed space of the truck they both heard her loud and clear.

"Soon means soon. I mean it this time." When Eleven crossed her arms across her chest he let out a sigh and glanced up at the Wheeler house. "How about we aim for Christmas?"

She looked up and glanced at Mike. "When is Christmas?"

"47 days from now." He said after taking a moment to do the math in his head.

"When is the Snow Ball?"

The mere mention of the event that had probably been the second worst day of his young life felt like a punch in the chest. He swallowed a lump that had settled in his throat and choked out the date. "December 15th, 10 days before Christmas."

She turned back towards Hopper with her jaw slightly set. "Aim for December 15th." She said, the same determination in her voice as when she had tried to convince everyone that she would be able to single handedly be able to close the gate on her own.

He looked between the two of them before nodding. "Alright, alright, December 15th." He agreed. "But you *have* to tell your parents. Tonight. Just get it over with."

"Fine." Mike said, sounding just as unexcited as he felt.

"It'll be okay." Hopper tried to assure him, though his words didn't offer much support. "Practice what you're gonna say a few more times with Nancy. And if you mess up a little bit it's not the end of

the world. We'll figure something out."

Before Mike got the chance to even reach for the door handle Eleven perked up. "Can I go to the door?"

Mike watched expectantly as Hopper thought it over. He eventually sighed once more and faced forward again. "Fine. But go straight to the door and straight back."

He eagerly grabbed his backpack and pushed the car door open. Before she shut the door behind her Eleven poked her head back in and said "don't watch". She slipped her hand back into his as they made their way up the walkway. It took everything in him to not pull her inside the front door. He knew that he would have to have patience when it came to her limitations with going outside.

When they got to his front door they faced each other, eyes moving back and forth between their hands and faces. Eleven was the first to break the silence. "Do you think your parents will like me?"

"Yeah, of course they will." He answered immediately, unsure if it was possible for anyone to dislike Eleven. "Why? Do you think they won't?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Just nervous." She answered.

"Don't be." He told her. "When you do get to meet them I'll be there with you the whole time. And so will Nancy. It'll be fine."

A small smile made his way onto her face and she pulled him closer to her by his hand. "I want to go to the Snow Ball. It looked like fun."

He felt a look of confusion pass over his face. "What do you mean? You saw it?"

Eleven nodded, smiling a bit more. "In the void. I was in my room the whole night watching."

Mike felt the same pain he had in the year that she had been gone from him wash over once again. He almost didn't even go to the Snow Ball, thinking there was no point since she wasn't going with him, but his friends managed to convince him to go out at the last



minute. He'd been miserable the whole night, the ghost of her voice and her touch haunting him the whole night. And the whole time she'd really been there? Mike quickly wrapped his arms around her and hid his face in her neck so she wouldn't see him start to cry.

Only seconds later she felt arms lock around him and her hand rub circles around his back. "What's wrong?" she asked. He could see the expression she wore clearly in her mind by the worry in her voice alone.

"I just missed you." He said, his voice cracking from the strangled sob stuck in his throat. "I missed you so much."

Eleven tightened her grip on him and pulled him closer to her. The flannel she had on smelled like a fireplace and the vanilla body wash that Nancy used to use. "I missed you too." She said. Her lips were next to his ear and she didn't have to speak much louder than a whisper. "I should have left to come find you sooner."

He shook his head against her neck. "No, it's better that you were safe there." Mike said. As much as it had pained him to be away from her he knew that Hopper had a point. If he knew that she was out there than there was a chance that she could have been found. After all, he likely would have never been able to stop talking about her. "It was just so hard."

"I know." She whispered next to his ear. "It was hard for me too."

They stayed like that for what felt like an hour but was likely only a few minutes. Time seemed to stand still yet go so much faster when he was with her. Every inch of his body that touched hers buzzed with electricity. Being with her once again felt so good that he was a bit impressed with himself that he'd managed to survive almost a whole year without her.

"Mike?" she asked after a few minutes had passed.

His wave of tears had passed so he pulled away from her just enough so that he could look at her. "Yeah?"

Her hands moved to rest on either side of his face, her thumbs

running across the freckles scattered across his cheeks. Suddenly she stood on her toes and pressed her lips against his. Ever since their reunion his friends had made various jokes about him being whipped and totally wrapped around her finger. He knew without a doubt that they were right. They were still young but Mike was sure that there was no one else in the world as perfect for him as Eleven. The universe had brought them together despite all odds not just once but three times.

There was a reason Mike had volunteered to keep her at his house when he and his friends found her the rainy night of November 7th 1983. He'd known from the moment he'd laid eyes on her that she was someone he wanted in his life. By the next day he knew that she was someone he *needed* in his life. Eleven was one of a kind. The way he felt when she kissed him made him sure that he would never love anyone the way he loved her.

When they pulled away from the kiss they grinned at each other like love sick idiots until Hopper honked the car horn once, a reminder that they didn't have all day. They took a step apart from each other, still holding hands. "Call me when you tell them, okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, of course." He said. "And promise you'll call me if you need anything. I mean it, anything."

She nodded, another smile spreading on her face. "I promise."

Eleven pressed a quick kiss on his cheek before turning and jogging down the walkway to the car. Mike waited to go inside until Hopper started up the car and drove away. It wasn't until they turned around the corner that he took his keys out of his pocket and pushed the front door open. Instead of going upstairs to his room to get started on his homework he went down to the basement.

Once he was downstairs he crawled into Eleven's old blanket fort and closed the 'door' so he was hidden from the rest of the world. It wasn't until his eyes were shut and his back was pressed against the wall that he let a new wave of tears wash over him.

Hours later Mike was sat at his desk with his social studies homework out in front of him when Nancy appeared in his doorway. "Dinner's

ready." She announced, "You ready?"

He let out a shaky breath as he pushed his chair out and got to his feet. "Yeah, ready."

They made their way downstairs and into the dining room where their parents and Holly were already starting to load up food onto their plates. Despite how his nerves made him feel sick to his stomach Mike took as much food as he could stand to look at in front of him. His mom first asked Holly about her day, then Nancy, before turning her attention to Mike.

He sucked a breath in through his nose and held it for a second. "It was fine." He answered. "Did you hear Chief Hopper is adopting a girl?"

Both his parents looked up from their plates, forks stopped midair and food half chewed in their mouths. "No," his mother answered, "I didn't hear that. How did you?"

Mike shrugged. "At school." He said as casually as he could. "Will's mom is friends with him so she asked him about it. He said something about trying to keep her a low profile until all the paperwork is done." He stabbed his fork into a baked carrot and forced himself to swallow it. It slid down his throat like a brick. "My friends and I stopped by to go introduce ourselves yesterday."

In his peripheral vision he could see his moms shocked expression. He had taken keeping secrets from his parents to a whole new level. "You did?" she asked. He silently nodded his head. "What's she like?"

*Perfect.* "I don't know, she's cool. Kind of shy." Under the table his leg bounced up and down at the speed of sound. "I think we might go visit her again soon. She's not in school yet so she doesn't have any friends in town yet."

His mom took a sip of water, mulling over what he had said. Mike braced himself for the worst. For her to call him out or somehow know that he was lying. What she said instead was much worse.

"Is she cute?"

Mike coughed as he choked on his broccoli, quickly trying to recover by grabbing his water and gulping it down. He could feel everyone's eyes watching him carefully as his face started to burn. Under the table he felt Nancy kick him in the shin and he knew it was her way of telling him to pull it together. Once his airways were cleared again he looked back up at his mother. "Sorry... *what?*"

Karen shrugged, pushing her sliced carrots around on her plate. "I don't know." She said, "Just the way you're talking about her. She seems... special."

Mike shrugged his shoulders once more. "I don't know."

"What's this girls name?"

*El.* "Jane."

"Well tell Hopper and Jane that they're welcome over any time. Nancy can you pass the lasagna?"

In a moment the conversation had shifted and Mike felt like he could breathe again.

## 5. Chapter 5

yikes this chapter is a bit shorter than the rest. please leave me some suggestions on how I should continue this story! I have a few ideas but I'm curious to see what you guys want out of this.

---

In the following weeks they all eventually fell back into a routine. Paying attention in school became easier and, if needed, the kids would exchange notes they missed before going home. Friday after school and Sunday afternoon, and the occasional day in between, Hopper would pick Mike up and drive him to the cabin so he could visit Eleven. Days where he was stuck at home missing her Mike would do his homework as fast as possible so he could try to squeeze in a phone call before dinner as well as afterward.

On Wednesday Mike went downstairs to the kitchen to grab something to drink and take a break from his biology homework. His teachers were beginning to scramble to cram in everything they needed to know for midterms in time. As a result they were all left with heavier backpacks than usual. Mike leaned against the counter and rubbed his head in hopes of reliving the headache he had developed.

Just as he finished filling a glass up with tap water the doorbell rang. He and his mom were the only ones home and since she was upstairs on the phone he was left heading for the front door. When he opened it his eyes landed on an older man with a mostly bald head and a thick beard. He wore big glasses and a trench coat over a suit. He was vaguely familiar for a reason Mike couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Can I help you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Murray Bauman." He said, sticking his hand out for Mike to shake. When he simply stared at it Murray dropped it back down to his side. "I'm looking for Nancy Wheeler, I have something special to drop off for her."

"What is it?"

He handed Mike the newspaper he was holding. "A piece she helped me work on got published today. I didn't tell her or Johnathan that I got the green light for it. I wanted it to be a surprise. I'm sure she told you about it."

Mike frowned down at the paper. "No." he said, "She didn't."

"Page four." Murray said as he turned away. "It's a good read if I say so myself."

With a puzzled look Mike closed the front door and wandered back into the kitchen. Since when was Nancy helping someone with a piece for the newspaper? And why hadn't she mentioned it to him? He hadn't even known that writing was something she was interested in the first place. Questions swarmed his mind as he sat down at the kitchen table and opened the paper up to page four.

## **RUSSIAN SPY IN HAWKINS?**

*By Murray Bauman and help from an anonymous source*

*The disappearance of Will Byers had the entire town of Hawkins on edge for the six days that he was missing. But when he was found and brought to the hospital most were able to breathe a sigh of relief. Everyone thought it was nothing more than a child getting lost in the woods. But what most don't know is that the Byers boys' disappearance is connected to a government coverup and a Russian spy with telekinetic abilities.*

*It is still unclear exactly how the Hawkins lab and Department of Energy were involved with the disappearance of not only Will Byers but also Barbra Holland. But it is more than a coincidence that the Department of Energy building was shut down only days after Byers was found and was converted into the hospital many are now familiar with. Not only that but everyone employed to the Department of Energy within a five mile radius of Hawkins hasn't been heard from in months.*

*So what exactly are they hiding? According to my anonymous sources the Department of Energy has enlisted children to act as Russian spies. Specifically one little girl who has been spotted by multiple people around town. Multiple witnesses saw a middle school aged girl with a shaved head use her telekinetic powers to smash the front doors of Bradley's Big Buy.*

*One witness even said that she was staying with a family right here in Hawkins. Just like the employees of the Department of Energy this girl, or any other children who may be like her, have not been seen in months.*

*I assure everyone reading that I will not stop digging until I find the truth about the Department of Energy and just how much the Hawkins police has covered up.*

Mike read the article three times just to make sure he was reading it right. Nancy had helped in write that? She had told him all about Eleven while fully aware of Mike's feelings for her. An anger worse than when he'd found out Hopper had been hiding her overcame him. How could Nancy, his own sister, do something like that to him? To Eleven?

He bolted out of his chair and rushed to the phone in the kitchen, punching in the Byers house number. Mike paced back and forth as the line rang, his body temperature climbing as he got more and more angry.

"Hello?" Joyce's voice said in the speaker once the line stopped ringing.

"Mrs. Byers, hi, is Nancy there?"

"Yeah she is, honey, what's up?"

Mike tried to take deep breaths to keep himself calm. Joyce wasn't the one he was angry at. "Can you tell her I need her to come home? Like right now."

"Of course, is everything okay?"

"I just need to talk to her about something very important."

Once he hung up the phone Mike grabbed the newspaper and headed for the front door. It only took seven minutes to drive from the Byers house to his. He dropped down onto the front stair and waited anxiously for the seven minutes to pass, checking his watch about every 30 seconds. Mike was just as antsy as he had been when he waited for Hopper and Eleven to get back from the lab. Only for a much different reason, and this time there was no one there to come

out and comfort him.

He thought about everything he would say until Nancy's car pulled into the driveway. She hurried up the walkway with a worried look on her face, likely expecting the worst. "What's wrong, Mike?"

He shoved the newspaper into her hand. "What the hell is this?" he said, his anger clear in his voice. "Is it true, you helped him write this?"

Nancy's eyes quickly scanned the article, her mouth still hanging open. When she looked back up at him she grabbed his arm and pulled him back inside. "Let's talk about this somewhere private."

Mike led the way down to the basement, his hands shaking angrily at his side. He paced the length of the room while Nancy closed the door behind her and followed him downstairs. She took a seat at the bottom of the staircase and watched him. Mike shook his hands out in hopes of casting aside some of her anger. But as soon as his eyes fell on Eleven's old blanket fort emotion came crashing over him all over again. He blinked back angry tears, determined not to cry.

"Tell me that it's not true." He said, his eyes still focused on the blanket fort as he waited for her to reply.

Seconds passed until they turned into a full minute. He knew the answer but waited for her to say it anyway. "The article was supposed to be about Barb. I told him that Eleven had nothing to do with it."

Mike turned to face her. "Then why the hell is there once sentence about Barb and a whole paragraph about Eleven?" he shouted.

"I don't know!" She yelled back, suddenly standing up. "He said he wanted to help bring closure to her family and figure out a way to tell people what really happened to her."

"And you really thought that after you told him about a girl with telekinesis he would really care about Barb? Because that sounds pretty stupid, Nancy." Mike rubbed his hands over his face, feeling how hot his skin had turned. He could only imagine how red his face was. "If you really wanted to tell people what happened to Barb why



didn't you go to Hopper?"

"Well he wasn't exactly helpful once Will was found."

It took all of his self control to not rip his hair right out of his head. "The people from the lab are still out there." He said, taking a sharp breath in so he wouldn't hyperventilate. "What do you think is gonna happen when they read that?"

Nancy shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Honestly Mike," she said, speaking quieter than before. "Most of us thought she was dead. I just didn't think that... the article was never supposed to be about her."

Mike shook his head, tears once again threatening to break free at the thought of Eleven being dead. "Well it doesn't matter." He said, "I have to go to Eleven that because of that stupid article she might be stuck in the cabin for another year."

Before she could reply Mike pushed past her and ran up the stairs and up to his room. Once he was alone again a couple of tears escaped and ran down his cheeks. He angrily wiped them away as he sat down on his bed and called the number to the cabin, taking deep breaths to try and calm down as the line rang. How the hell was he supposed to tell Eleven and Hopper about the article? Mike, in a strange way, felt responsible for it. He should have known somehow that she had told someone about Eleven.

"Hello?" Hopper's voice came from the other line.

"I need you to come pick me up." Mike said. "Something happened. It's kind of an emergency. I need to get out of here."

"Woah, woah, slow down kid." Hopper said. "What happened?"

"Did you get the paper?"

"No."

"Please, Hopper, I need you to come get me. I need to see her. I'll tell you what happened but *please*."

He heard Hopper sigh, "Okay, alright. I'll be right over."

After hanging up the phone Mike dug through his closet for his backpack and started stuffing clothes inside it. His mind was working much too fast to think anything particularly coherent. He knew it was unlikely that he would get to spend the night in Hopper's cabin so he planned on having himself dropped off at one of his friends houses. All he knew was that he couldn't be in the house with Nancy and pretend like he didn't hate her guts at the moment.

Once everything was packed he grabbed his backpack and went downstairs. As he grabbed the newspaper article off the table in the kitchen where Nancy had left it he heard footsteps coming in from down the hall. Though he prayed it would be his mom when he looked up he spotted Nancy in the doorway wearing sheepish expression.

"Where are you going?" she asked, her arms wrapped around herself.

Mike forced himself to not start yelling again. "Someone's gotta break the news to El and Hopper. He's on his way to pick me up."

Nancy took a few steps into the kitchen. "Mike, I'm sorry." She said. "The article was never supposed to be about her. The only reason I brought her up was to provide context."

He sighed as he folded up the article and tucked it into his pocket. "You know it's shit like that, how easily information about her could get out, that made Hopper keep her from me for almost a year and let me think everyone think she was dead the whole time." She flinched slightly at the harshness in his tone but he kept going. "Look, I'm sorry about Barb. I want people to know the truth about her. But she's dead and Eleven is alive and I'm going to do everything I can to protect her. So I have to help Hopper figure out a way to clean up this mess so my girlfriend can attempt to have a normal life."

Mike picked his backpack up again and walked around Nancy to wait on the couch in the living room for Hopper to pull up. Only a few minutes later Nancy went back up the stairs and up to her room, giving up on trying to apologize. *One witness even said that she was staying with a family right here in Hawkins.* Thank god Mike was

bringing the paper with him. He couldn't even begin to imagine what would happen if his parents read that article and remembered the night that people from the lab had been crawling in his house. He had spent almost two months trying to convince them that he knew nothing about it. Mike eventually had to tell them that the blanket fort had been built when Dustin found a stray dog and was trying to figure out a way to convince his mom to let him keep it.

He heard the engine of Hopper's truck before he saw it pull up. Mike was out the door and jogging down the walkway before the car even pulled into park. He hopped in the passengers seat, feeling a pang of disappointment when there was no sign of Eleven in the back.

"Alright, what's going on?" Hopper said as he pulled back out onto the road.

"My sister is an idiot and I hate her." Mike replied as he fished the article out of his pocket. He read it aloud to Hopper as they drove back to the cabin. They were about halfway there when he finished reading and stuffed it into his backpack, out of sight. "I'm not going home tonight so whenever you want me to leave you can drop me off at a friends house."

They were silent for a few blocks as they both took in the gravity of the situation. While Hopper had some power to discredit the article Mike, a middle school student, had nothing to offer when it came to a solution. He kept his fingers crossed that the article wouldn't prevent him from being able to visit Eleven or even call her. If it did he doubted he would ever be able to trust Nancy ever again.

Mike was too deep in thought to notice his eyes starting to water again until Hopper reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey," he said, "it's not the end of the world. We'll figure it out."

He pulled the sleeves of his sweatshirt over his hand and wiped his eyes. "Yeah. I know. I'm just... so angry at her."

Hopper turned onto the trail in the woods and flipped on the headlights. "Don't call off your sister forever because she made a mistake. We'll figure out a way to make all this go away."

Mike held his tongue from pointing out that keeping Eleven locked up in the cabin and not allowing her to reach out to him had also been a *mistake*. He knew he needed to let it go if he was ever going to have a good relationship with Hopper as his girlfriend's dad/guardian. As soon as the thought occurred to him he realized the same could be said about Nancy if he wanted to continue being close with his sister. He was still so angry with her that he wasn't sure if it was worth it.

They reached the point from which they had to walk the rest of the way. Mike grabbed his backpack and put it up on his shoulders and fell into step next to Hopper. "You gonna call your parents and let them know where you are?" he asked.

"Nope."

They were silent for the next yard or so, the sky above them turning cloudy. "She's been practicing reading a lot ever since you told her about homework."

A smile forced itself onto his face to replace his previous grumpy expression. "Really?"

"Yup." Hopper said, a small smile of his own starting to appear. "She usually just reads some books I bring back from her but she's been reading the dictionary. She kept calling me at work to ask me to help explain something to her."

"I still have my English homework with me." Mike said. "Maybe I'll show it to her later on."

"I bet it'll make her day."

Eventually the cabin came into view, a soft glow coming from the windows and smoke coming out of the chimney. As they approached the front steps he heard the locks inside before the door flung open and Eleven stepped out onto the front porch, a large sweater and pajama pants practically drowning her. Her eyebrows were pulled together with concern. "What happened?"

"I told you to wait inside for us." Hopper said as he climbed up the

steps behind Mike.

Eleven grabbed the screen door and pulled it open, keeping it open with her mind as the three of them stepped inside. "I was anxious." She said, wiping the small trickle of blood with her sleeve.

"Good word." Most of Mike's anger melted away when he saw the pride on her face after he complimented her.

He could tell how antsy she was as they all sat down, Eleven taking the spot next to Mike on the couch and pulling his hand into her lap. Her gaze moved back and forth between them as she waited for them to explain. "What happened?" she asked again.

Hopper took it upon himself to explain, which was thankful for. "Mike's sister went to a reporter and told him a lot about what happened last year. And about you." Mike felt her grip on his hand tighten. "It was very generic and we're going to find a way to fix this so don't get worried."

Eleven rubbed her thumb across the back of his palm before turning to look at him. "Why would she do that?" she asked.

"I don't know." He admitted. "She said she wanted the article to be about Barb, but then I don't know why she wouldn't have brought you up at all."

Hopper rested his elbows on his knees. "Tomorrow I'm going to call the newspaper and try and get a statement out to them that everything in the article is a lie. Then I'm going to call Murray and tell him that he can't put out another article like that again or I'll arrest him."

"For what?"

"Breathing." He got to his feet and started down the short hallway. "I'm gonna get dressed."

Once he was gone Mike turned to look at Eleven, whose face was filled with worry. "Don't worry." He said, though he was not at all convinced by his own words. "We're not gonna let anything happen to you."

She offered him a small smile. "I know." She said. "I'm worried that I won't be able to see you for a while again. And that you won't be okay again."

Mike swallowed down his own fear of being separated from her. "Don't worry about me, okay? I'll be fine. Whatever happens we'll figure it out." He quickly tried his best to shift the conversation. "Hopper told me you did a lot of reading today."

Her face lit up and she jumped off the couch, quickly running into her room and coming back out with a dictionary. "I've been reading it since March." She said as she opened the book up to a page marked with a bookmark. "Sometimes I go back a few pages because I don't understand good. A lot of words are hard. But I made it to S."

"You made it all the way to S already?" he asked, clearly surprised. "So that's how you kept yourself busy?"

She laughed, "A little." Eleven marked the page again before closing the book and setting it on the table in front of them. "Remembering all of them is hard. And knowing how to use them. I don't always use them right."

"What's your favorite word?"

He watched her carefully as she thought, biting down on her bottom lip as her brows came together. "Um... I can't pick just one."

"Okay," Mike said, "then what's your top five?"

She held her hand out and counted on her fingers. "Exuberant, observation, infatuation, probably, and boast."

Mike couldn't help but be incredibly impressed. Less than a year before she didn't even know what the word 'friend' mean. Yet there she was listing off words that he never imagined she'd be able to say. "Those are great words." He said, giving her hand a light squeeze the way she always did with his.

"The hard part is using them right." She rested her head on the back of the couch, her forehead pressed against his shoulder. "I wish I was smart like you."

He felt his heart sink slightly and he shrugged the shoulder her head was against. "Hey, look at me." Though she kept her head pressed against his arm she tilted it so he could see her face. "There's different types of smart. I'm book smart and you're street smart."

"Book smart is better."

"Not necessarily." Mike said. "You have to be really street smart to do half the things like you've done. Like escape the lab and find your mom and your sister."

Eleven shrugged, looking unconvinced. "Still." She said simply.

Before Mike could protest any further Hopper came in from the other room in jeans and a flannel shirt instead of his uniform. He saw his eyes linger on their intertwined hands and was thankful he didn't say anything. Hopper grabbed his car keys from the table next to the kitchen before turning back to them. "Kid, why don't we go get something special for dinner since we have company?"

Mike looked over at Eleven in time to see a wide grin explode on her face before she jumped to her feet and pulled him with her. She eagerly slipped on her sneakers and pulled on a jacket before following Mike and Hopper out the door to the cabin. Hopper reminded her that she shouldn't get used to going out so much, but that didn't stop her from practically buzzing with excitement as they walked to the truck.

## 6. Chapter 6

well it's been a hot minute since I updated this story. some of you guys know that I've had so much writers block with this chapter but I managed to get over I and upload today! hopefully it won't happen again since I have some things planned out for once. enjoy!

---

As they drove to the local diner Mike and Eleven sat in the backseat of Hopper's truck, both keeping an eye out for anyone who might look suspicious. The article clearly had them all on edge by the way the air in the car was thicker than usual. Mike was still in disbelief that Nancy could not only betray him but Eleven like that. The article burned a hole in his pocket with its presence but he didn't remind. It was easy to forgive Nancy for things in the past. She was his sister and the only real person in his family who cared and understood. Or so he had thought. Clearly she wasn't as trustworthy as he had thought she was.

Hopper parked in the parking lot of the diner and told them to keep their heads down while he went inside. They both unbuckled their seatbelts and slid down in the space between the front and the backseat. Eleven grabbed both of his hands and set them in her lap, her thumbs rubbing his freckled skin.

"How can I help?" she asked, her wide brown eyes scanning his face.

"Just be here with me." Mike said, inching towards her as best as he could in the limited space they had. "That's all I need."

Eleven rested her head on the seat, a small frown on her lips. "I don't like seeing you sad. Saw enough of that in the void. I want you to be happy."

"With you I am happy." His fingers absentmindedly hovered over her tattoo. Mike remembered the day they had met how she looked like she was going to take his head off when he tried to touch her tattoo. "I'm just mad at Nancy."

"You can't be mad at her forever."



"I might."

Eleven picked her head up and leaned over to peek through the console and out the window. When she didn't find whatever she was looking for, he guessed Hopper, she closed the distance between them and pressed her lips to his.

Mike was terrified of going too far with her and doing anything that she didn't really understand the importance of. But she'd been the one that asked about being his girlfriend and she was always the one who kissed him first. She seemed to know exactly what she wanted. Knowing that it was him that she wanted made everything inside him light up and only made him fall more in love with her. Eleven was simply remarkable. And the fact that someone as amazing as her wanted someone as underwhelming as him made him feel like the luckiest person on earth.

Her hands left his only for a moment before resting on both of his cheeks, her fingertips brushing against the back of his neck. The outside world melted away until nothing apart from Mike, Eleven, and the truck existed. Their lips moved together in perfect synchrony as if they had been practicing for years. Her hands moved closer to his neck until her fingers were lost in his hair and sending goosebumps along his whole body. Every moment that they were together, every time they spoke on the phone, he could feel himself falling more in love with her. And every day he was surprised at how much farther he could fall.

Eleven pulled away suddenly, her cheeks pink as she once again looked out the front window. He only had time to wonder what had happened for a moment before he heard the car door open and Hopper appeared in the drivers seat with a to-go bag. Mike felt his whole body go warm at the possibility that he might have caught them almost making out.

They were mostly silent on the ride home, Eleven seeming to be just as embarrassed as he was. But it didn't stop her from holding his hand the whole ride back.

Mike didn't mind the silence one bit. It gave him time to think over everything that had happened with Nancy and how best to avoid her

when he finally did go back home. He would spend all his time in the basement, that way he wouldn't have to pass her room on his way to the bathroom every morning and night. He'd keep the door locked and would only come out when the phone rang for him. Mike simply had no clue how she could do something like that to him. To Eleven.

It was Nancy that had been so supportive when Eleven was gone, the one who pushed him to talk about it a little more than everyone else. She had helped him gather the courage to tell his parents about Eleven. She was the only one he'd admitted that he loved Eleven to. He had always felt that no matter what she'd be there to listen and only tease him a little bit. Having someone he trusted so much be the one to spill the beans about Eleven made him feel like he could be sick.

He felt a light tug on his hands snapping him out of his train of thoughts. He looked over at Eleven to find a concerned look on her face. "She didn't want to hurt you." She said, as if she had been reading his mind. Could she do that?"

Once the car was parked Hopper led the way as they walked back to the cabin. Mike and Eleven hung back a few feet, her hand still wrapped around his and her arm brushing against his. He had to remind himself that as possible as it was that the article could be a that to his safety that she was still there with him. Mike found it hard to worry about her being taken away from him again when she had such a solid grip on his hand.

Hopper set the to go bag down on the table once they were inside and Mike took the same seat next to Eleven that he had the morning after she shut the gate. "I'm going to call Murray later on and tell him that the article is nonsense and he has to put something else out." He told them while Eleven unpacked the bag and handed them their food. "He's pretty stubborn but I'll figure out a way to knock some sense into him."

"Longer until I go out?" Eleven asked, already sounding disappointed as she opened up the container of food in front of her.

Hopper let out a sigh, likely expecting another argument with her. "I don't know, kid. Maybe. We'll have to be more careful for sure."

She picked at her food with her fork. Mike could see his own desire for her to be able to go out reflected on her face. "Still going to the Snow Ball. No matter what."

Mike couldn't help but smile a little bit, glad she was so excited to go.

They ate mostly in silence. Every so often Eleven would bump her leg against his, a silent reminder that they were still together. Like she knew it was exactly what he needed. Though he was no longer fuming about what Nancy had done it still left a bitter taste in his mouth and a sour feeling in his stomach. He dreaded going home and having to face her. Not just because she had hurt him but because he knew that even if he forgave her things between them wouldn't be the same. He would never feel comfortable confiding in her about Eleven. It would always be a worry in the back of his mind that it could happen again.

Try as he might he couldn't figure out what on earth she was thinking. Nancy was a smart person. Did she seriously think that Murray would make the article strictly about Barb when she had told him about a girl with telekinetic abilities? Or was it just an excuse because she didn't want to tell him the reason she had told him about Eleven. He simply didn't understand why she would think talking about her was okay.

She knew how much he cared about her. How much he needed her to be safe. Nancy had said it herself; she'd seen how much of an effect Eleven's absence had on him. So why on earth would she do anything to make it even worse?

After they ate Hopper started flipping through the notebook for Murray's number while Eleven pulled Mike over to the couch. They sat facing each other with their knees touching. He struggled to hold himself back from touching her too much since Hopper was only a few feet away. She had her head against the back of the couch and her hand wrapped around his, her thumb running along his skin. Her expression had been dull ever since they started eating and he had been waiting until they had some space to ask her about it.

"You okay." He asked, his voice dropping slightly as he leaned towards her.

She shrugged, her eyes moving up to meet his. "Sick of being inside all the time. I want to go out and do normal things."

He struggled to keep his face composed. The only thing he could imagine being worse than thinking Eleven was dead for a year was knowing exactly where she was and not being allowed to contact her. He could only imagine how frustrated she had been, cooped up in a three-room cabin for a year and only being able to see her friends in her mind. Never being able to see them in person, or talk to them or touch them. He only hoped that he realized just how strong and amazing he was.

"You will be able to." Mike told her. "And in the mean time we'll all come visit and keep you company. It won't be like before. You won't be alone all the time."

"I know." She said, though she didn't sound convinced. "Just scared."

"Scared of what?"

Her gaze dropped to look at their linked hands, her teeth biting down on her lower lip. "Scared that if I can't be normal soon you won't want to be with me."

Mike could feel his heart shattering into a million pieces that scattered across the floor. The worst part was that he could tell she truly meant it, that it was a genuine worry of hers. Did she not understand how much she meant to him? That he would do anything for her? That he thought she was the single most amazing person on earth. Mike pushed himself off the couch and onto his feet, tugging her hand lightly. "Come on, I wanna tell you something."

Hopper was dialing Murray's number when she followed him into her room. Mike closed the door over but made sure not to latch it so they wouldn't get scolded. Eleven went over to her bed and pulled her sleeved over her hands nervously. Had she been worried that he would lose interest the whole time? How could he have been clueless of her anxieties?

Mike sat down next to her, shoulder to shoulder, and pulled her hand towards his. "You really think that?"

Eleven shrugged, her eyes focused on the floor in front of them. "I don't know."

"El I promise that would never happen." He wrapped his arm around her waist, his other hand still holding onto hers. "You have no idea what you mean to me. I don't care if it's a year, or two, or five that I have to wait for you to be able to go outside. I'll come visit you every day if you want me to. I would *never* lose interest in you."

A small smile made its way onto her face but he could still see that she wasn't fully convinced. He wished he could look inside her mind and see everything she was worried about so he could tell her it wouldn't happen. "You don't know. You can't see the future."

"No, I can't." he agreed. "But I don't need to. You're such a huge part of my life and you mean so much to me that there's no way I could feel different. Do you think you would lose interest in me?"

"No." she said immediately.

"So then why don't you believe that I won't either?"

Eleven sighed and rested her head on his shoulder. "I don't know." She admitted. "Just scared."

They fell into a comfortable silence that allowed them to hear Hopper on the phone perfectly. The walls were thin and the cabin was so small it was as if he were in the room with them. "I don't care if your source is the Queen of England Murray they're lying to you. You ever think that they would say this girl stayed in their house just to get their fifteen minutes of fame? ... Well did you them that you weren't going to name them in the article? ... Well then there you go... Tell you what, you figure out a way to fix this mess and I promise you that if I get any word of a Russian spy with mind powers you'll be the first to know... I don't care how you fix it as long as you do it... Well then you better get to writing to make the morning paper I guess."

Eleven turned her head to look up at him. "You can't be mad at her forever." She told him. "She's probably worried about you."

"Probably not."

After a moments hesitation she got up from the bed and walked over to the dresser across the room. "I'll prove it." she said, grabbing the bandana and radio from the dresser before walking back over and sitting facing him.

He watched her turn on the radio and mess with the frequency until it was only static and white noise. She set it on the bed between them and pulled the blindfold over her eyes. It was then that he realized she was going to spy on Nancy in the void. The same way she had checked up on him and his friends for the whole year. He watched her anxiously, waiting for something to go wrong like it had when they set up the pool in the gymnasium. The Demogorgon was dead and he knew, logically, that there was no way it could intercept. Still he inched closer to her and was ready to tear of the blindfold if something happened.

"She's on the phone with Johnathan." Eleven said, her hand searching for the radio. He took it and placed it in her hand and watched her mess with the frequency again.

The white noise stopped only a moment before he heard his sisters voice come from the small speaker. "I really messed up. God, I'm so stupid."

"You're not stupid." Johnathan's voice replied.

"I just wanted people to know what happened to Barb. So that they wouldn't forget about her and that her parents could get closer. I was too focused on it to realize that obviously he was going to write the article about Eleven. Mike's going to hate me forever."

"Come on, you know that's not true."

"Johnathan you don't get it. You didn't see the way he was without her. If something happens to her and he gets like that again I don't think I'll be able to forgive myself." She let out a long sigh. "What should I do?"

"Just give him some time. What was the angriest he's ever been at you before this?"

"Probably when we were younger and I ratted him out for finger painting on the walls in the living room."

He watched a wide smile spread on Eleven's face as she likely imagined what Nancy described.

"How long was he mad at you for that?"

"This is different."

"He won't be mad at you forever. How about tomorrow we go talk to Murray and tell him we made the part about Eleven up just to get his interest?"

"Can we go now? I can't just sit here."

"I'll come get you in 10."

Eleven shut off the radio before taking off the blindfold and using it to wipe the blood off her nose. A small seed of guilt had been planted in his stomach. Guilt for exploding at Nancy like he had. Was he still mad? Yes. But the fire inside him that had been ignited when he read the article had burned itself out. He groaned and put his face in his hands.

Mike felt Eleven's hands land on his knees before he heard her voice. "Holding a grudge only hurts you."

He peeked at her between his fingers. "Where'd you get that from?"

"A movie." She said, "But it's true."

"Yeah I know."

Eleven scooted on the bed towards him before wrapping her arms around his neck. He hugged her back, instantly feeling a little bit better. "I don't want you to leave." She said, her voice quiet and right next to his ear.

"I can come back tomorrow after school if you want me to." He told her, his hands rubbing circles on her back. "I know it's not Friday but I can bike here myself."

She nodded, her head rubbing against his neck. "Please."

Before he could think of something else to say there was a soft knock on the door and he and Eleven quickly pulled away from each other. Hopper cracked the door open and stood in the doorway. Either he didn't see them hugging or pretended not to. "We'll see what happens in the morning. He said he'll try and get something out in the paper in the morning. We'll go from there." His eyes fell on the radio between them. "What's that for?"

"Nothing." she answered shortly.

Hopper nodded his head at Mike. "You know he's right there? You don't need to listen in on him."

She waved her hand and a pillow flew off her bed and across the room, hitting Hopper in the chest. Mike could see him trying not to laugh as he tossed it back and then turn back out into the living room. Eleven wiped the small drop of blood coming out of her nose with her sleeve. "He doesn't want me to break another one."

"Another one?"

She nudged the radio. "I listen a lot."

Mike tried not to think of all the embarrassing she could have seen him say or do in the past year while she was watching him in the void.

They ended up laying side by side on their backs, talking about anything and everything. Mike ended up doing most of the talking since she hadn't left the cabin much and she didn't seem to want to talk about what happened when she did. He told her about how Troy had hardly bothered him all year thanks to her. He told her about Max driving the car while she was in the lab and how he had been sure they were going to get into an accident. She laughed when he told her about Steve being beat up so bad that he had thought Mike was Nancy. He did his best to leave out the sad parts, like how he almost threw up the first time he tried to eat an Eggo after she left or how he slept in her blanket fort for a week after the night in the school. Though most of his dreams were still haunted by the darkness



that had come over his life when she was gone he hardly felt it when he was awake. Knowing she was accessible and not so far away made missing her a lot more bearable.

A little while after the sky out the window had gone dark Hopper once again appeared in the doorway. "You wanna sleep at the Byers tonight? Joyce already said it was okay."

Mike had known there wasn't a chance he'd be lucky enough to spend the night with Eleven a second time. So he pushed himself upright and nodded. "Yeah, that's okay."

Eleven jumped to her feet, a hopeful smile spreading on her face. "Can I come? I want to see Will."

In the three weeks and five visits that she and Will had met they had clicked faster than anyone expected. He let her borrow some of his records when he found out she'd never listened to the Clash before and helped her overcome her fear of animals that Mike didn't quite understand. When the Byers dog waddled into the room she looked scared out of her skin, her hand clamping down around Mike's before she pulled her legs up off the floor. Will had showed her how to get the dog to hold her hand and, slowly but surely, she was the dogs biggest fan.

"Only for a second, okay?" Hopper said, but all Eleven seemed to hear was a yes.

She pulled on her shoes and jacket in a hurried whirlwind and she was practically bouncing on the ride to the Byers house. Under different circumstances Mike might have been jealous but he knew better. Eleven and Will had perhaps the most in common out of anyone in the group and they had to wait a whole year to meet each other. Plus she never called any of them on the phone every day. Only Mike.

When she had been living in his basement, and he was young and naïve, he had been insecure about the possibility of Eleven's feelings for him. Looking back hers were as clear as his own. But at the time he had been sure that no one as cool as her could have any sort of interest in him. Part of the reason why her insecurities that he would

lose interest in her were so ridiculous was because he had been afraid of the same thing while she was gone. They'd only known each other for a week. Surely she wasn't as attached to him as he was to her.

In the middle of his train of thought he had to bite his tongue when she whispered in his ear once more that she didn't want him to leave. He loved her so much it made his chest hurt so much. And he so badly wanted to tell her so that she would never again question his feelings. But that was a lot to dump on someone and the last thing he wanted was to scare her off. Mike was sure that in a years time he would look back the same way he could on the week she was in his house and wonder how he could have been so clueless. But for the time being he was determined to bite his tongue and maybe take Nancy's advice on getting someone else to talk to Eleven about the L word.

## 7. Chapter 7

Whoops sorry for the ten day wait for this update. Let's hope I don't pull that again.

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Mike biked home from school while sending silent prayers to whoever in the sky may have been listening that Nancy wouldn't be there. He had come to accept the fact that he would have to forgive her eventually. His anger hadn't made him stupid. His sister was one of his top support systems. There was no way he could completely write her off. Still, he wasn't ready to let go of his anger, and he knew things between them wouldn't go back to normal right away.

"You're lucky to have a sister that loves you." Eleven had said when he walked her back to Hopper's truck the night before. "Not everyone does."

He could sense a hidden meaning in her words but didn't have the time to ask her about it so Mike made a mental note to bring it up at a later date.

Mike let out a sigh of relief when he saw empty spot in the driveway where Nancy's car usually was. Though his relief was quickly clouded when he saw his dad's car sitting next to his mom's. Ted wasn't usually home for another hour. Mike immediately started wondering what could have happened to make him come home. Did he get sick? Had something happened to Holly? Or to Nancy or his mom? He dropped his bike off on the front lawn before hesitantly making his way to the front door, not quite sure what to expect.

He stepped inside and could instantly hear his parents voices from the kitchen down the hall. Try as he might to listen to what they said their voices were too low to make out specific words. He was just kicking off his sneakers when he heard his mom's voice loud and clear. "Michael?"

"Yeah?" he called back.

"Can you come in here?"

He dropped his backpack on the floor and wandered down the hall. Once in the kitchen he spotted his parents sitting next to each other at the kitchen table. He crossed the room and, halfway to them, he spotted the article sitting on the table between them. Barb's Sophomore year picture stared at him the same way the ones of her and Nancy did every time he went down the hall and into her room. Mike forced himself to keep walking until he was sitting across from them, his eyes still glued on the article. "What's up?"

His father slid the paper towards him. "Did you read this?"

Mike considered lying before he guessed that if he did they'd make him read it right then and there, and he didn't think he could read the speculation about Eleven again. "Yes," he finally said.

"Do you remember last year when the Department of Energy came to the house? What they told us about... the girl?"

How could he forget? Mike had remained tight lipped the whole night, knowing that he was the only one in the house that could give them the information that they needed. It didn't take them long to figure out getting through to him was a lost cause and they eventually left their cards with his parents. After everyone went to bed that night he tore the business cards up and threw them away in his room. Still he was occasionally paranoid that their contact information was somewhere in the house. His eyes glanced over at the spot on the counter he had taken them from almost a year ago.

That night he had undergone two separate interrogations. One from the Department of Energy and one from his parents. He knew he couldn't deny that Eleven had been there, they'd found the blanket fort and had seen them together in the school. But Mike said the same thing to his parents that he said to the Department of Energy; even if he knew where she was she would never tell the lab. His parents had never once mentioned Eleven after that night and only made the feeling that everyone had forgotten about her worse.

The sound of his mom clearing her throat snapped him back to the present. "You know where she is, don't you?"

"No," he instantly lied. Though he loved his parents he didn't trust

them. How was he supposed to know they wouldn't turn her in if they ever found out where she was?

His mom sighed and leaned her arms on the tabletop. "Michael we've known that you know where she is for weeks." She told him. "That night you slept over at Dustin's? You came home like a totally different person. We're not stupid."

Mike glanced back and forth between his parents. He found it hard to believe that they'd noticed anything about him. They were, putting it kindly, clueless to the most important things of his life. He'd hid a girl in the basement for a whole week after all. Hearing his mom say she'd seen a change of him in the past few weeks was the first indication he'd gotten that they'd even noticed how he depressed he was in the first place. He looked down at his hands in his lap and could practically feel the ghost of Eleven's touch. He instantly wondered if she was watching him in the void. Mike lifted his gaze and glanced around the room, his eyes instantly stopping on a spot on the wall. He had absolutely no definitive proof but he just *knew* she was watching him.

"I'm not telling you where she is." He replied. There was no point in denying he knew where she was. The change in him was night and day. If there was anything his parents would catch onto all on their own it would be that.

In his peripheral vision he could see his parents exchange a look. "Mike, don't you remember what they said?" his father asked him. "This girl is dangerous."

Mike attempted to swallow down his anger but it was easier said than done. His words would have made them angry even if Eleven hadn't heard them. He was sick and tired of people making her out to be some monster when it couldn't be farther from the truth. "Look, no offense or anything" he said, "but all you guys know about her is what some government minions told you about her. And trust me, they're not a reliable source."

They were both taken aback with his attitude for a moment. Not that he'd never talked back to them before. "Well how are we supposed to know anything about her when you never talk to us?" his mother

asked.

Mike squeezed his eyes shut. He hated that Eleven was there, watching everything that was happening. He wished he could communicate to her that he didn't want her to watch without speaking out loud and looking like a crazy person. "You do realize you guys never, not once, asked me about her right?" he said once he looked at them again.

"Yes, we did." His dad immediately countered. "We asked you after the Department left."

He let out a laugh that lacked any humor. "Oh, so sorry, you asked me about her once at the worst possible time." Mike snapped. "I'd lost her two hours ago! Did you seriously expect me to talk about it?"

"Michael, we're trying to talk to you now." His mom said, cutting him off before he could say anymore. "We don't want to believe that you would hide someone like that in the house and risk all our lives. But you don't *talk* to us. You've been so secretive, how are we supposed to think you're not hiding something?"

He let out a frustrated sigh and leaned back in his chair. What felt like a breeze on his shoulder was yet another confirmation that she was there. Whether it was how well he knew her or something having to do with her powers Mike could practically feel what she was thinking. She knew he didn't want her to see what was happening. But she wasn't going anywhere. Knowing that she was there for him helped settle him down a little bit.

"I'm not hiding anything." He managed to say calmly. "I'm trying to protect her."

"Protect her from what?" his father asked.

"From the Department of Energy." Mike said, "They're the ones who are the monsters. They were willing to shoot us just to get to her. The only reason they didn't is because she protected us."

His mom shook her head, "Why wouldn't you *tell* us that? We wouldn't have let them in the house if we had known."

"Because I was scared!" Mike half shouted. "I just wanted her back! I thought she would come back when they left so I just wanted them to leave."

Silence fell over the three of them and Mike's gaze once again drifted to the article. He, just as he had all day at school, wondered how the article would affect her ability to leave the house. Would it prevent her from going to the Snow Ball? Would they have to cut back their visits? The thought of seeing her any less than he already was made his heart pound nervously. Now that they were together again he would do anything to protect her. But cutting back the time when he saw her was something that wouldn't come easy to him.

"Do you think..." his mom began, but her voice trailed off as she glanced over at his dad. Mike watched them carefully out of the corner of his eye. "Do you think we could meet her?"

His first instinct was to say no. He didn't want to take the risk of having her with anyone that couldn't be trusted. What if asking to meet her was a ruse just to hand her back over to the lab? As soon as the thought entered his mind he chastised himself. His parents were clueless and absent. But they weren't cruel.

"Um, I'd have to ask her." Mike said, shifting in his seat. "And who she's staying with."

"We'll wait."

It was her indirect way of telling him to ask now. Mike got up from his seat and crossed the room to the phone on the wall. He dialed the number to Hopper's cabin and leaned against the wall while it rang.

He hardly had to wait before he heard a voice from the other line. "Are you okay?"

Mike couldn't help but smile at the worry in her tone, yet another reminder that she truly cared about him. "So you did see?"

"Of course." She replied. "Do you not want them to meet me?"

He dropped his voice so his parents wouldn't be able to hear. "It's not that." He said, "I just want you to be safe. And after what happened

yesterday I don't wanna make super big risks right now."

"You don't want them to meet your girlfriend?"

She was teasing him. Mike's face instantly flushed bright red, not only at her tone but at the fact that she called herself his girlfriend. He was once again struck with how lucky he was that she was his. "I do. But I don't wanna do anything to risk your safety."

"I want to meet them. I want them to like me." She hesitated for a moment. "He just got out of the shower. If he says okay can I come?"

"Yeah of course."

Mike spared a look at his parents while he waited for Hopper. He could hear Hopper's footsteps in the background before he asked Eleven who she was talking to. She did him the favor of explaining everything that had happened, allowing him to really hear just how much her vocabular had expanded. It took her a minute or two to tell him everything, thankfully she had left out a few details of what he had said about her, and once she was done they were both silent.

He heard Hopper ask to talk to him before she handed off the phone. "Do you think they would tell anyone?"

Mike shrugged despite the fact that he wasn't there to see. "Maybe. I don't know. I hope not."

"Do you want me to talk to them?" Hopper offered. "Explain how important it is that they not say everything?"

"Okay."

Mike held the phone away from his ear and waved his mom over. She hurried across the room, shooting a glance at his dad before she reached him. Mike handed her the phone but stayed close in Hopes of hearing.

"This is Karen."

"Yeah, hi Mrs. Wheeler. This is Chief Hopper."



He watched his mom's eyes go wide and she looked across the room at his dad again. "Chief Hopper? Hi. How are you?"

"I'm fine. I, uh, heard you read the article. That you wanna meet Eleven."

She was clearly shocked that someone she had previously believed to be a threat was staying with the Chief of police. Mike didn't blame her. He tried not to think about everything they'd likely been thinking about Eleven for the past year, likely none of them good. He was determined to make sure Eleven had as normal of a life as possible. Being able to meet her boyfriend's parents was a very normal teenage thing to do. He wanted so badly for her to not have to worry about her safety all the time.

"Well Mike just told us that we had an... incorrect first impression of her." his mom explained. "I think it would be best if we got the chance to actually meet her after all this time."

"I agree." Hopper said. "But I have to make sure you understand that this is kind of a big deal, Karen. These Department of Energy people aren't good people. As far as they're concerned she's dead. If they find out she's still alive they would do everything they can to track her down."

"Oh."

"If it was any other family I would say no. But Mike is very important to her. And I think she would really like to meet you guys." In the background he could hear Eleven's voice saying "Don't tell them that!" A wide smile broke out on his face. "If you guys would be able to keep her a secret until she's able to go out I think we can make an exception."

He could tell his mom still didn't quite understand the gravity of the situation. Someone who hadn't seen what had happened couldn't understand. She hadn't seen the Demogorgon or been in the Upside Down. She didn't know who Dr. Martin Brenner really was. She hadn't seen how terrified Eleven was when they found her or how she had flinched the first time Mike had ever tried to touch her. Karen Wheeler just simply didn't get it.

At least not fully. She seemed to know that when she nodded her head. "We won't say anything." She told him. "When would you guys like to come over?"

"Does this weekend work?"

"Yep, how about Saturday evening? You guys can come over for dinner."

"That sounds good. I'm sure she'll be waiting impatiently." Mike once again heard Eleven's voice in the background whining "*Stop*." Hopper once again ignored her. "I'll see you then Mrs. Wheeler."

"Karen." She corrected.

Before Mike got the chance to ask to talk to Eleven again his mom hung up the phone. His heart sank slightly, disappointed she'd only gotten. The chance to talk to her for a minute or two. His father's voice across the room kept him from dwelling too much. "She's been staying with the Chief?"

They both looked at him and Mike shrugged his shoulders. "She had to stay somewhere." He said, unsure how to explain how Hopper had figured out she was living in the woods and left her food until she got the courage to go with him.

"So the other day when you told us that he was adopting a daughter you were talking about her?" his mom asked.

Though he was glad he no longer had to lie about knowing Eleven, at least to his parents, he hated the way it had to happen. He would have personally collected every copy of the article in Hawkins and burned them all himself if it meant Eleven would be safe. "Yeah." He admitted. "He is going to adopt her. And Jane is technically her name. None of us call her that though."

A small smile spread on his mother's face. "I could tell you were holding something back by the way you talked about her."

Mie got flashbacks to when she had asked him if Eleven was cute and how he almost choked. "Oh my god."

"I sure hope you two were responsible when she was staying here."

"Oh my god." Mike turned and started walking out of the kitchen before he could be further embarrassed. "I have homework."

He grabbed his backpack from front door and hurried up the stairs and into his room. Mike closed the door behind him and locked it in case Nancy once again tried to apologize to him. He wasn't ready yet. Not while he had so much homework to do. Mike's backpack was stuffed with his books and what he had packed when he left the house and he began taking out everything. Once everything was emptied out and he began putting his school things back his eyes landed on a small scrap of paper on his bed. A small, curious frown settled on his face as he picked it up. The handwriting was unfamiliar but there was no doubt in his mind who had written it. *I miss you.*

Mike cleared all his belongings off his bed so he could sit down and stare at the small scrap of paper. A familiar burn ignited in his throat and it took him a moment to identify its source. Missing Eleven was a completely different experience than it had been before he knew exactly where she was and that she was okay. His body ached with desire to see her and he was constantly battling himself to not hop on his bike and go straight to the cabin. He hated that half the time she was all alone there with a very limited number of things to keep her occupied. Not for the first time since they'd reunited he wished she was still living in the blanket fort in his basement. He replayed the phone call between Hopper and his mom. *Mike is very important to her.* His heart ached with how much he missed her and Mike had to lay down. Before he knew it tears were streaming down his cheeks and soaking up in the blankets he lay on.

He had no idea how long he lay there crying as silently as he could, but he only stopped when the phone rang. Mike sat up and wiped his cheeks with his sweatshirt sleeve before reaching for the phone. "Hello?"

"What's wrong?" Eleven's voice said from the other line.

"Nothing's wrong."

"Friends don't lie." She said. "Nancy just called and said you were

crying."

Mike knelt on his bed and looked out the window, spotting Nancy's car in the driveway. He scowled as he sat down again with his back against his headboard. "Sorry." He said, immediately feeling bad about lying when he was the one who taught her that friends don't lie. "I just don't want you to worry about me."

"I always worry about you." She told him. "What happened?"

He picked the note she had left him back up. It was the closest he could get to looking at her. "Nothing really happened. I'm just scared that something's going to happen to you again."

"We'll be careful." She said. "I'm not leaving you again."

Mike felt his throat start to burn again and he attempted to swallow down the feeling. She seemed to always know just exactly what he needed to hear. He knew he wouldn't be able to survive losing Eleven again. There was just no way his body would be able to take heartbreak like that twice. Mike let out a small sigh of relief that she was just as determined to avoid being separated from him as he was. "Promise?"

"I promise." She said. "I'll never leave unless you want me to."

"I would never want that."

"I guess I'm never leaving."

A wide smile spread on his face and he grabbed one of his pillows and hugged it close to his chest, desperately wishing she could be there with him. But he knew he only had to wait two more days to see her again. Not only that but she would be at his house. "I still have your blanket fort in my basement." He told her.

"I know." He could hear the smile in her voice. "I saw."

"It'll be weird seeing you talk to my mom." He said. "I'm so used to having to hide you from her."

She laughed, only making him smile wider. "Do you remember when

I came upstairs while you were at dinner? And you spit milk all over yourself?"

Mike groaned. "Oh my god, you saw that?"

"Yes. It was cute."

"It was embarrassing."

"I almost got changed in front of you guys when we met. That was embarrassing."

Mike's cheeks burned at the memory. He had thought his heart was going to burst out of his chest before he managed to stop her. "Yeah but you didn't know."

"That's why it's embarrassing." She hesitated. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I never said thank you for letting me stay with you."

His stomach did a summersault. "You wanna know something?"

"Yes." She said eagerly.

"I volunteered for you to stay with me because I thought you were really pretty."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I wanted to spend time with you alone with Dustin and Lucas left. Not that I expected you to like me or anything. I just wanted you all to myself a little."

"I was too scared but when we got home I thought you were cute." She said. "Very confusing."

"Yeah." He agreed.

Before Eleven he'd hardly even had a crush on a girl before. He'd noticed a few before, but it never became anything more than wondering what things could be if they were different. Then Eleven

had come crashing into his life. He remembered how his heart had pounded the whole bike ride home with her arms around his waist. Despite the freezing cold rain on his bare arms, thanks to him giving his jacket to her, his skin felt like it was on fire.

"I want it to be Saturday now."

It was like she took the words right out of his mouth.

## 8. Chapter 8

the chapter I'm sure you guys have been eagerly waiting for lol.

I don't say this enough but thank you so much everyone that had read, favorite, followed, or reviewed this story. And an extra special thank you to those that comment on more than one chapter/every one. Seeing familiar names always makes me smile :)

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Saturday evening there was a soft knock on Mike's bedroom door before it cracked open and a tentative looking Nancy stood in the doorway. "I'm going to hang out with Johnathan. Give you guys some space tonight."

"Okay." Mile replied.

He was torn between desperately needing his sister to support him through such a nerve wracking experience and wanting to protect Eleven from her. As if he wasn't already stressed out enough. Eleven and Hopper were coming over in less than an hour and he felt like a wreck. He'd changed his clothes three times and cleaned up both his bedroom and the basement. He wanted everything about the night to be as perfect as possible. It didn't help that his parents nerves were rubbing off on him. Mike sat on his bed, his supercom next to him, while he struggled to not call his friends for advice.

"Are you nervous?" Nancy asked. They were back on speaking terms, but only at dinner and when they passed each other in the house.

"Yeah." Mike admitted. "What if they turn her in or something?"

"Mom and dad are clueless, but they're not stupid." She said. "They're gonna like her, and they're gonna see that she's a good kid. And they're definitely gonna see how much she means to you."

"I just don't wanna lose her."

She shifted her weight from one foot from the other. She could see how hard she was resisting the urge to come over and comfort him.

"You won't. She has ten people who care about her and are gonna make sure nothing bad happens to her again. You're not the only one who doesn't want to see her get locked up again."

Mike was struck with how much he missed his sister and he had to lean back against his headboard to keep from darting across the room and hugging her. He wasn't ready to forgive her. They both knew it. But that didn't mean he didn't feel weird without her as a resource. A slightly awkward silence fell over them while they likely thought the same thing, neither of them having the courage to say a word.

"If anything happens and you need me to come home just call the Byers and I'll come right back." Nancy said.

"I thought you said they would like her." he said, a lame attempt at breaking some of the tension.

Nancy cracked a small smile. "Just in case."

She walked back out into the hall and out of sight, leaving Mike to wish he had the courage to say something more to her. But he already had way too much on his mind to even begin thinking about how to go about making amends with his sister. Once he heard her car pull out of the driveway he got to his feet and made his way downstairs. On a normal day his father would be asleep in his Lazy Boy. But Mike was only slightly surprised to find him in the kitchen helping his mother prepare a meal she had been stressing about for almost an hour.

"What time are they coming over again?" His mom asked when she noticed him standing in the kitchen.

"Six."

His mom groaned and opened the oven to check on the progress of her food. "I hope they don't mind waiting to eat for a little bit."

"She's not picky mom, trust me." Mike said. "She ate my leftovers as meals for a week."

She shut the oven and turned to look at him. "Well I sure hope my cooking was good that week. Poor thing."



"It was fine mom." he said. Mike glanced at the clock on the wall, his stomach doing a nervous backflip when he saw there was only another ten minutes until they were supposed to come. "She's really shy, so she might be a little closed off a first." He told his parents. "And she doesn't exactly have the normal vocabulary for a fourteen year old."

"Why's that?" his dad asked, sneaking a green bean when his mom wasn't looking.

"They never really taught her how to speak in the lab." Mike told them. They'd tried to get more information about Eleven from him ever since they arranged for her to come over, but Mike had remained mostly tight lipped. "Just be a little patient with her if she doesn't understand something."

The doorbell rang and promptly interrupted the conversation. Mike spared a glance at his parents before hurrying to get the door. Before reaching for the doorknob he stopped to take a deep breath and attempt to gather himself. Though he knew Eleven would be able to see right through him and tell instantly that he was nervous he at least wanted to attempt to look confident in front of Hopper. Anxious to see her he yanked the front door open and he instantly spotted her standing on the doorstep. He only got the chance to look at her for a second before she threw her arms around his neck.

"I missed you." She said, hardly speaking above a whisper.

Mike wrapped his arms around her waist, spotting Hopper walking up from his truck and not bothering to pull away. "I missed you too." He said, resting his chin on her shoulder. "Are you nervous?"

"Yes." She admitted. Eleven pulled away from him just as Hopper reached them, holding up a bag he hadn't noticed her holding. "We brought dessert. It's supposed to be polite."

An ear to ear grin spread on his face as he reached for the bag. "What is it?"

She held it away from him before he could grab it. "It's a surprise."

Mike stepped out of the way so they could come inside, watching Eleven's face carefully as his mom came from down the hall. She glanced at him as she approached and Mike smiled at her in hopes of encouragement.

"You must be Eleven." His mom said, wearing a wide smile when she finally reached them with his father trailing close behind. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Thank you." Eleven said, holding out the bag. "We brought this for you."

She took the bag from her, peeking inside before looking back up at her. "That's very sweet."

Hopper shrugged off his jacket and hung it up on the coat rack next to the door. "Thanks for doing this, Karen."

"Not a problem."

While their parents talked Eleven turned towards Mike, a small and uncertain smile spreading on her face. He could tell how nervous she was so he reached for her hand despite the fact that they were only standing a few feet away from their parents. "You're doing great." He said quietly so they wouldn't hear.

Her smile twitched up. "Thanks." Her eyes wandered around the foyer for a moment before meeting his again. "Where's Nancy?"

"She went to see Johnathan." He said. "Did you want to see her?"

Eleven shrugged. "Can I see the blanket fort?" she asked, quickly changing the subject.

"Yeah, sure."

Mike glanced at their parents, who were still talking, before pulling her towards the basement door and closing it over behind him. He followed her down the stairs and watched her look around the room. Her smile grew when she looked at the blanket fort and she immediately headed for it. Mike knelt down on the floor in front of her, unable to hold back a wide grin. He remembered the first night

she'd ever stayed at his house and when he'd reached for her when he saw her tattoo, and how she had completely flinched away from him. It was hard to believe the girl who sat in front of him was the same person.

"Do you think they'll like me?" she asked wrapping her arms around her knees.

"Yeah of course." Mike said, moving to sit next to her in the small space. "Why wouldn't they?"

Eleven shrugged, her arm moving against his. "I've been practicing what I want to say." She said, her gaze seeming far away. "About the lab."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You sure you're okay to talk about it?" Mike asked, instantly worrying about her. She hardly ever talked about the lab, both when she was staying in his house and since they'd been reunited. He knew enough to know exactly why she never wanted to go back. But he didn't exactly have a detailed understanding of what had happened to her. Maybe it was for the best. He was angry enough at the people from the lab without knowing specifics.

"Yes." Her eyes met his again and he did the best to read her expression. "He said they didn't understand. I want them to understand. Like you."

Mike reached for her hand and laced his fingers between hers. "You don't have to talk about anything you don't want to, though. Right?"

"I know." She said. "I want them to know."

He wrapped his arm around her, keeping her close. She rested her head on his shoulder, some of her curls tickling his face. He wished they could stay there forever. Or that she didn't have to leave in only a matter of hours. "I'm really proud of you, El." He said, pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

"Do they know I'm your girlfriend?"

Mike hesitated. "Um... I think so. They can probably tell, but I never

really told them."

She tilted her head to look at him. "Why? Embarrassed?"

"Oh my god, no." he said immediately. "Absolutely not, El. I just... I don't tell them a lot of stuff."

"Secrets?"

"Sort of." Mike said. "Okay, so there's two types of parents. There's parents like Joyce and Hopper who are involved with their kids and who know what's going on with their kids. But then there's ones like my parents who are kind of clueless. That's why they never noticed you were here."

She hummed quietly as she thought over what he said. "So if they don't know stuff why don't you tell them?"

"Because..." his voice trailed off as he tried to think of how to say what he was thinking. "Even if I do tell them stuff they don't really care that much. They're both too busy with their own lives, you know?"

Eleven lifted her head and looked at him with an expression of concern. "But you're their son." She said. "They're supposed to love you."

"They do love me." He assured her. "But they love me from a distance. Get it?"

"I think so." Eleven said, a small frown spreading on her face.

Mike tugged on her hand gently. "But it's okay. I don't really care. And Joyce makes up for a lot of it."

He quickly changed the conversation topic since it seemed to bum her out.

Around ten minutes later the basement door opened and Hopper called down the stairs that dinner was ready. Mike stopped her before she could go upstairs, giving her a few last words of encouragement and giving her a quick kiss that turned both their faces red. She held

onto his hand as they made their way upstairs, both of them ignoring how his parents eyes trailed down to their intertwined hands. Hopper seemed to have gotten used to it since he hardly blinked when he noticed. Eleven sat between Mike and Hopper, glancing at him as they all put food on their plates. He could tell how nervous she was getting and smiled at her every time their eyes met.

His mom was the first to speak and break the silence. "Mike told us you're working on adopting Eleven?" she asked, her direction directed more towards Hopper.

"Yeah, it's gonna take a while though." Hopper replied. "First we have to get her a birth certificate and a social security number. I'm pulling all the strings I can so it doesn't take too long. She's pretty antsy to get to leave the house more."

Ted raised an eyebrow, "She doesn't have a birth certificate?"

"If she has one I haven't been able to find it." Hopper said with a shrug. "But we're changing her name anyway so I think a fresh start would be nice for her."

His parents nodded in agreement. Karen then turned her attention towards Eleven. "What do you do to keep yourself occupied since you're alone all day?"

She glanced nervously at Mike before answering. He nudged his foot against hers gently in hopes of it coming across as silent encouragement. "Um... watch movies. Practice reading." she glanced at him with a small smile, "Wait for Mike to get home so he can call me."

He felt his cheeks get red when his mom started laughing. "That explains why he's been on the phone so much lately." She said. "I should have known something was up." Mike could see Eleven glance at him out of the corner of his eye, likely remembering what he had told her in the basement. "Mike told us that we had..." his mother's voice trailed off as she tried to think of the right words, "an incorrect first impression of you from the Department of Energy."

"They lie about a lot of things." Eleven said quietly. "They're not good

people."

"Help us understand." Karen said. The air in the room was growing thicker while the conversation continued to get more serious. Mike's instincts were screaming at him to change the topic so she wouldn't have to talk about it. But she had made it clear that she was ready so he bit his tongue. "What exactly did they do?"

Both Hopper and Mike glanced at Eleven, waiting to tell her she didn't have to talk about it if she didn't want to. She pushed her peas around on her plate with her spoon. "They make me do things with my brain. Experiments."

"Things like what?"

Instead of replying she set her fork down and stared at her plate. Only a moment later it floated up into the air above her head. Mike watched his parents shocked expressions as she lowered it back down to the table and used her napkin to wipe the blood from her nose. Mike couldn't contain a grin, remembering how shocked he had been the first time he ever saw her use her powers. Though her slamming the door to prevent Lucas from telling his parents about her was a bit more shocking than her lifting a plate. He was glad they had sent Holly to her friend's house for dinner since she would have totally freaked out. "Other things too." Eleven continued. "I can find people in my head and see them from far away."

His parents gaped at her from across the table. Mike figured he should have warned them about her powers ahead of time. Not that they would have believed him if he had. "That's... amazing." His mother said.

"They wanted me to do bad things." Eleven said. He could see her growing increasingly uncomfortable so he reached for her hand under the table. "Couldn't say no to them so I left."

Karen spared a quick glance at Mike. "What kind of bad things?" she asked hesitantly.

"They wanted me to hurt people, made me practice on cats." She said, a shallow crease settling between her brows. "I didn't want to but I

got in trouble when I said no."

He was once again faced with the realization of how little he knew about her life before they met. Hearing about someone as kind hearted as Eleven being forced to hurt someone made his stomach churn. Seeing the look on her face when she talked about it made him feel sick. But he knew how hard his mother had worked on dinner so he forced another bite into his mouth. It felt like lead and he struggled to keep himself from spitting it out.

"What happened when you said no?" His mother asked, her sympathetic and worried expression growing stronger and stronger.

"They lock me in a room until I say I'll do it." She said. He could feel her embarrassment and shame radiating off of her. Mike grabbed her hand under the table, partly for to comfort her and partly to comfort himself. "I left because I didn't want to do it anymore."

Mike was desperate to talk about something that wasn't so difficult for her. She may have been read to talk about it but he wasn't sure he was ready to hear it. "She can do really cool stuff though." He quickly chimed in. "She flipped a van once. And she broke Troy's arm when he was trying to hurt Dustin."

"And you." She added.

"And she helped us find Will when he went missing last year." Mike continued, watching the small smile on her face grow. "We probably wouldn't have found him if she hadn't."

"We *definitely* wouldn't have." Hopper agreed.

He watched her cheeks turn pink and couldn't hold back a relieved grin.

The sound of the front door opening and closing cut off the conversation. They all listened to the footsteps coming down the hall until Nancy appeared in the doorway, looking nervous. Her eyes landed on Eleven and she flashed her an uncertain smile. "Hey El."

"Hi Nancy."

She looked back at Mike, her hands tightly gripping onto her purse. Even from where he sat he could see her knuckles turning white. "Johnathan didn't feel good so I came back. I can just go upstairs and let you guys be if you want."

"Well why don't you eat with us?" their mom asked. "You weren't there long enough to have dinner."

Nancy glanced at Mike, waiting to hear what he had to say. The same feeling he'd felt earlier overcame him, the desire to just suck it up and forgive her. He didn't think he was ready to face the fact that things between them would be different. But for the time being he desperately needed an extra person there for him. And for Eleven. Mike nodded his head, causing a wide smile to explode on Nancy's face before she hurried over and sat at the head of the table between Mike and their mom.

"What are you guys talking about?" she asked as she scooped some food onto her plate.

"When Eleven helped us find Will."

Nancy smirked at him. "Remember that night when you lied to my face and told me you didn't like her?"

Mike felt his face catch on fire. It had been a pathetic excuse for a lie, especially considering he kissed her less than half an hour later. He was prepared to explain to Eleven that he hadn't truly meant it but figured he didn't have to when he heard her laugh quietly. "Says you." He countered, "You told me you didn't like Johnathan."

Nancy shrugged her shoulders. "And I didn't. Not then."

He rolled his eyes at her. "Liar. You totally did."

His father spoke up for pretty much the first time since they'd sat down. "Nancy, you knew all about this when it was going on?"

She looked between her parents as she tried to think of how to answer. Both she and Mike knew there were some things their parents were better off not knowing. Like how she had gone into the Upside Down and narrowly escaped the demogorgon, and had a



second face off at the Byers house with both her boyfriends only a couple days later. "Sort of. I didn't know Eleven was in the house until when she... when everything happened." Nancy glanced at Mike, clearly hesitant to bring up what had happened in the school. "I only met her for a little while."

With Nancy's help Mike managed to keep the rest of dinner conversation on a lighter note. Though Eleven was obviously nervous the whole meal she did a much better job at talking to Nancy and his parents than he expected her to. When his mom brought in the dessert she had brought, which was Eggo waffles with whipped cream and various candies on top, they shared a knowing look. Even if he wanted to keep a straight face there was no way he couldn't smile. He was eating dinner with his family and his girlfriend and didn't have to worry about keeping secrets from them. At least not too many secrets.

Once they finished eating everyone brought their plates into the kitchen and set them in the sink to be washed later. When Nancy excused herself upstairs to work on homework Mike spotted a small frown appearing on Eleven's face. "What's wrong?" he asked

Her eyes moved from the staircase to meet his. "Wanted to talk to her."

"Oh." Mike glanced at their parents talking in the kitchen. Though Hopper hadn't seemed to mind when they went to the basement he wasn't sure he would be as cool with them going alone a second time. But he guessed that he wasn't the only one who had something to say about the article. If anyone had a right to be upset it was Eleven. Only she didn't seem upset. "Um... okay."

He led her up the stairs while their parents weren't looking, uncertain of what exactly she would say to Nancy. Eleven had always seemed so focused on assuring Mike that he needed to forgive her. Did that mean she wasn't upset? He tried to put himself in her shoes and try and figure out how she could possibly not be mad but couldn't come up with anything. When they reached her room he hesitantly knocked on the door.

"Yeah?" she replied from the other side.

He cracked the door open and let Eleven go first. Her eyes did a once over of the room while Nancy glanced nervously between the two of them. Mike could only imagine how guilty she felt with Eleven standing in front of her. He knew she'd been beating herself up about it even when she wasn't around.

"What's up?" she asked them.

After taking in the room Eleven looked at Nancy, looking a bit uncertain as well. "I'm sorry about Barb." She said, her fingers fiddling nervously while she talked. "I didn't try to find her and Will soon enough."

Nancy brought her hand to her mouth as she very obviously tried to hold back tears. Her number one coping skill when it came to dealing with the loss of her best friend was taking care of Mike and Holly. She seemed convinced that if she dealt with other people's problems her own would go away. But it was clear every time Barb was brought up that it wasn't working.

"It's not your fault, El." She said, managing to keep her tears at bay for the time being and letting her hand drop into her lap.

Eleven glanced at him shortly before walking over to the bed and sitting down next to Nancy, wrapping her arms around her and pulling her into a hug. Nancy almost immediately wrapped her arms around Eleven's waist, burying her face in her neck and letting out a short sob while her tears flowed for the first time in a while. Eleven watched Mike while she hugged her, seemingly unsure if she was doing the whole comforting thing right. He nodded at her from across the room, letting them have the moment to themselves.

"What was she like?" Eleven asked, resting her chin on top of Nancy's head.

"She was the best friend I ever had." Nancy cried. "She was always looking out for me. Even when I didn't want her to."

Nancy had expressed her guilt about Barb's death only a handful of times. Mike knew she'd last been seen at Steve's house and assumed that she'd been left alone so Nancy and Steve could spend time

together. He always struggled to imagine how she was able to cope so well while carrying around that kind of guilt. The way she broke down and cried into Eleven's neck made it clear she wasn't coping as well as he thought.

"I'm sorry about the article." Nancy sobbed. "I just wanted people to pay attention to what happened to her. I should have known he would have made it about you."

"It's okay." Eleven said. "My... dad will take care of it."

Mike raised an eyebrow at her at the way she called Hopper her dad. She simply shrugged and he knew she would tell him later.

Nancy picked her head up and wiped at her wet cheeks. "I would never purposely do something that might hurt you. And not just because Mike would kill me if I did." Eleven let out a short laugh that broke some of the tension. "I'll do anything to make it right."

"He said he might do a... press conference" she glanced at him to check she'd said the word right, "about the article to say it's not true. I can ask him if he can talk about Barb when he does."

Nancy shook her head, "You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

She wiped at her cheeks again, sniffing a couple more times. "Mike's really lucky to have you." She said. "We all are."

Mike saw her cheeks turn pink, unsure of how to take the compliment. It was clear that she didn't give herself enough credit for the amazing things done. He couldn't even begin to imagine how many people she had saved from killing the Demogorgon and closing the gate. But she didn't seem to think of it as much as a compliment. Even hearing that they were lucky to know her made her uncomfortable to stand up and return to his side.

"Are you two gonna behave yourselves or should I put on my headphones?" Nancy joked.

He rolled his eyes at her, his cheeks turning hot. "Just don't listen in

like you do on the phone sometimes."

Eleven slipped her hand into his as they made their way down the hall into his room. He closed the door over but didn't latch it just in case that was an unspoken ground rule. A small smile formed on her face as she took in his room, her eyes looking over every last detail. He was glad he had cleaned up earlier.

"So," he began, "Dad?"

Eleven turned towards him and shrugged. "He'll be my dad on the birth certificate. I'm practicing." She reached for his hand again and pulled her closer to her. "Are you still mad at her?"

Mike sighed, looking down at their hands. "I don't think so. I'm going to talk to her later on tonight after you guys leave."

"Good." She said, her smile growing.

"You did really good with my parents." He said, easily shifting the conversation. "I think they really like you. And did you see the look on their faces when you used your powers?"

She laughed, the sound like music to his ears. "I thought you had told them."

"I didn't think they'd believe me if I did." He told her. "I can tell my mom liked you. She kept trying to get you to eat more because she wanted to impress you with her cooking."

"It was good."

"Do you want to take some home with you so you have something to eat tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "I want to come back."

Her words made him pause. She hadn't even left and he was already eager to see her again. They didn't see each other nearly as often as he wanted to. But he knew the rules. Hopper told him that going to the cabin too often was suspicious. Once they were closer to the adoption he would be able to come over more often. But while she

was still in hiding they had to be careful.

"I want you to come back too." Mike said gently squeezing her hand. "And you will. It just might be a little while."

She deflated slightly. "I know." Eleven said.

"Do you think you're still coming to the Snow Ball?" Mike asked, trying to brighten her mood a bit.

It worked. She perked up again, her small smile returning. "Yes. Even if he says no. I'll sneak out again."

He shook his head. "Don't do that. Hopper will get really angry at you."

"I don't care." She said. "I promised I would go. I'm going."

Mike felt his throat start to burn with forming tears and he quickly pulled her into a hug. Eleven's forehead perfectly fit in the crook of his neck while her arms tightly wrapped around his waist. He was afraid to be too confident in the fact that she'd be able to go to the dance in a month. He'd already had to deal with the heart break of going alone once. There was no way he was going to do it again. Mike knew that if she wasn't allowed to go out he would beg Hopper to let him at least come over and see her that night. He was determined to make that night as special as possible for her. If anyone deserved it it was Eleven.

"El?"

"Yeah?"

He held her tighter against his chest, feeling like he couldn't get close enough to her. "I'm really happy you're back."

She picked her head up so she could look at him, her smile twice as wide as it had been when he pulled her close. "Me too."

Eleven stood on her toes and closed the distance between them, pressing her lips against his. Fireworks exploded inside him and he knew he would never get used to the feeling of her kissing him.

## 9. Chapter 9

sorry I haven't really updated anything in a while! I went on vacation and got almost no writing done. Now that I'm home hopefully I'll be back on the grind again. I hope you guys enjoy this chapter

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Mike and Eleven lay on his bed with the radio on his night stand playing upbeat pop songs. It was a scene straight out of his dreams. It was easy to forget everything difficult they' been through when they were able to just relax and be kids for once. She asked him about school and he could tell she was hopeful that she would one day be able to go herself. He made sure to focus on as much of the positives of school as he could so he wouldn't scare her. Mike told her all about his favorite teachers and classes and did his best to explain why he didn't like homework since she seemed to think it was cool.

"Hey Mike?" she asked, turning on her side to face him.

"Yeah?"

"Remember when you told me friends tell each other things they don't tell parents?"

A small frown appeared on Mike's face. Where *was this going?* "Yeah."

Her face was growing increasingly nervous. A shallow crease had settled between her brows and she the corners of her lips were angled down. Her eyes wouldn't quite meet his. Despite how anxious she appeared she was still adorable. He doubted there was anything she could do to make herself not adorable. "Do friends tell each other things they don't tell other friends?"

Mike turned to face her, feeling himself start to worry more and more by the second. "Yeah, sure." He said, "What is it El? I won't tell anyone I promise."

A fleeting smile appeared before quickly disappearing. "Remember how I went to see Mamma?" Mike nodded, not wanting to interrupt her. "I saw someone else. I have a sister."

"What?"

"Her name is Kali. She lives in Chicago."

Mike's jaw practically dropped open. If he were standing it would have landed on the floor. "You went all the way to Chicago by yourself?"

She nodded. "I took a bus. She lives with a lot of her friends." Her eyes drifted away from his, somewhere far away. Maybe to Chicago. "I thought she would be a sister like Nancy. But she wasn't. They did things I didn't want to do, but I did because I wanted them to like me."

His stomach did a nervous summersault. He was sure he was experiencing a similar feeling to what his parents felt when they were at the dinner table while they learned about all the unpleasant things Eleven had been through. "Things like what?"

"They steal things. And they... they find the bad men from the lab and hurt them." She nervously picked at a spot on the blanket they lay on top of. "I tried to but I couldn't do it. Then Kali got mad at me because I wouldn't let her either. And I just missed you so much so I looked for you in the void, and I saw you were in trouble so I came back." Her eyes met his again. "Please don't tell anyone. I don't want them to know."

Mike could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Though she was clearly uncomfortable talking about it he desperately wanted to know more. He told himself he'd ask her more about it later. For the time being she'd said enough about it. "I promise I won't." he told her.

She smiled just enough to make his face feel warm. Sometimes she looked at him like he was the only person in the world she could see. Like he was important. Not just important to her but important period. It was hard to feel his usual low self esteem when her eyes lit up every time they looked at each other.

"Can I call you when I get home?" she asked, reaching for his hand and lacing their fingers together.

"Yeah, of course." Mike said instantly. "What? You think I'd get sick of you if we talked too much?" She silently shrugged her shoulders. "El I could talk to you for three days straight and still miss you the second you leave."

She giggled, a sound that made his body feel warm. "Me too."

Mike watched her eyes trail down his face and linger on his lips before meeting his once more. He was extremely aware of the fact that they were alone, their parents out of sight and out of mind. And he knew she was too by the way something in her gaze changed. He leaned the short distance between them and pressed his lips to hers, instantly feeling the same series of fireworks going off inside him. Her hand that wasn't holding onto his landed on his cheek, her thumb lightly brushing across his skin. His arm wrapped around her waist, the same constant need to be close to her overcoming him stronger than ever before. Her lips smiled against his before she scooted closer to him so there was hardly any distance between them. Mike was sure that she could feel his heart start to pound. If she couldn't feel it she could definitely hear it.

"El!"

They quickly parted at the sound of Hopper's voice from the bottom of the stairs. Mike practically jumped out of his skin for a moment, the sound of her father figures voice when they were kissing way too close for his liking. She sat up on the bed looking as disappointed as he felt. "Yes!"

"Start saying goodbye, kid, it's getting late!"

They both deflated and hopped off the bed. Eleven wrapped her arms tightly around his waist, resting her head against his chest. "I don't want to leave."

"I don't want you to either." Mike said, resting his head on top of hers. Considering how much taller he'd gotten it was hard to believe they had once been the same height. "You did so good tonight, El. I'm really proud of you."

"Really?" he could hear the smile in her voice.



"Absolutely. I can tell my parents really liked you. You spoke really well and you talked about some really hard things. And I can tell what you said to Nancy meant a lot to her."

"I didn't just watch you. I watched everyone." She said. "She's good at hiding it but she's really sad. She takes showers a lot so you won't hear her cry and get worried."

Mike's stomach twisted into a guilty knot. Nancy had spent the last year trying to get him to open up to her about his grief for Eleven and he'd been too heartbroken to even bother doing the same for her. He pressed a kiss to the top of Eleven's head, thankful to have her back for the millionth time. Mike loved her with all his heart and he knew it. And he was in no rush to tell her. It wasn't like she was going anywhere.

"I'll call you as soon as I'm done helping my mom clean up, okay?" he said. "I'll tell you all the nice things she said about you."

When they pulled away Eleven was beaming up at him. He gave her one last kiss before they headed out into the hallway towards the stairs. Mike didn't bother letting go of her hand when they made it down stairs to find Hopper putting on his jacket while talking to his parents.

"You two are welcome over any time." His mom was saying when they reached them.

"Well I'm sure this isn't the last you'll be seeing of her." Hopper said, glancing at Eleven with a raised eyebrow. "These two are practically attached at the hip."

Mike glanced over just in time to see Eleven's cheeks go pink. "Thank you for having me." She said quietly, not directly looking at his parents.

"It was our pleasure." His mom said.

Eleven gave his hand a reluctant squeeze before letting go and heading over to Hopper by the door. His own sadness at their parting was reflected in her face as she offered him one last smile before they

disappeared behind the door.

The house felt empty in an instant, despite the fact that his parents were standing only four feet away from him. He turned towards them to find both of them smiling, something that looked weird on his father. "Do you want help cleaning up?" he asked his mom, eager to be occupied until Eleven got home so he could call her.

He followed her down the hall and into the kitchen, spotting the Tupperware for leftovers already on the counter. His mom took on the job of putting all the food in containers while he offered to wash everything once she was done.

"El is a very lovely girl." His mom said as he began washing the first plate. "I can see why you like her so much."

His smile twitched upwards. "Yeah. She's really cool."

"Hopper told me a bit more after you guys went upstairs." She said. "About how he kept you guys apart. That it was really hard for her." Every muscle in Mike's body went tense. He'd been trying his best to rid himself of the anger he held onto ever since Eleven came back. Unsure how to reply he stayed silent and waited for his mom to continue. "He said he feels really bad about it."

"Good." Mike said before he could think about it.

He expected his mom to chastise him but she didn't. "I knew you cared about her. And I knew you missed her. But I just didn't realize how much." She watched him wash the plate, trying to gauge his body language. "Michael you could have talked to me."

He wanted to argue that he couldn't. That he didn't trust anyone who hadn't met Eleven and seen just how amazing she was. That he wouldn't take the chance of talking about her outside of the people who knew if there was any hope that she was still out there and alive. But he was tired of being angry. What was there to even be angry about? He had her back. That was all that mattered. "I was just scared." He admitted. "I knew my friends thought she was dead. But I just couldn't handle someone saying it to my face."

He heard her set down the container she was holding before she walked over and stood next to him. "Mike, I'm so sorry I didn't know how much you were struggling. I should have known and I should have tried to help you more."

Mike had long since given up on the hope that his relationship with his mother would go back to how it was when he was younger. Before Holly was born and before his parents relationship took a nosedive. But something about her words felt like a punch to the stomach. He set the plate down and dried his hands off on the towel, turning to face his mother. "I'm so scared I'm going to lose her again." He admitted, speaking barely above a whisper. As if the volume of his words would have an effect on how likely they were to happen.

She pulled him into a hug, and he didn't even bother fighting. Her hand rubbed circles on his back as he did his best to hold back what he hoped was the last round of tears he would shed for a while. "You won't lose her." his mom said. "She very clearly cares about you. I don't think either of you are going to let that happen again."

Mike sniffled, some of the tears he struggled to hold back fading. Hearing from someone who hardly knew Eleven say it was clear how she felt about him forced a smile onto his face. "She's pretty stubborn." He said, pulling away from his mom. "Hopper must be too to keep her locked up in the cabin for almost a year."

His mom grinned. "Makes sense that her and Nancy get along. They have something common."

At the mention of his sisters name he remembered the conversation between her and Eleven he'd seen only an hour and a half before. He quickly helped his mom finish up before going up stairs. He tried his best to think over what he was going to say to her but his brain felt more and more like mush as he made his way to her room. Just before knocking on her door he decided just to wing it. He cracked the door open and spotted her on her bed, her gaze looking faraway and not at all focused on the book in her lap.

She seemed to come back to reality when he walked in. "Hey."

"Hey." He crossed the room and sat on the edge of her bed. "So that

wasn't a disaster."

Nancy cracked a small smile. "Far from it I'd say. She did really great. You did too. I kind of expected you to get so embarrassed halfway through dinner that you would bail."

"I was tempted." He admitted. "But I think it would be worse if I left her alone with mom and dad"

"It absolutely would have been." Nancy agreed, her smile slowly growing. "She would have broken out the baby album the second you left."

"That's exactly why I stayed." Mike said. "You missed dad's eyes almost popping out of his head when she used her powers."

Nancy snorted at the thought. "You probably should have warned them ahead of time. What if they had a heart attack or something? Definitely would have been a mood killer."

"I didn't think about that." He admitted.

Silence fell between them and Mike struggled to speak the words that were in his mind. His desperate need to protect Eleven was unrelenting and difficult to shake. Though his logic-brain knew that he was ready to forgive Nancy and start moving forward towards going back to the way things were, his paranoid-brain was screaming that he could no longer trust Nancy and he had to just come to terms with it. Nancy nervously picked at her bookmark while he mustered up the courage to speak.

"Listen, um, about the article..." Mike began, unable to look directly at Nancy. "I know you didn't mean it to be about Eleven. I shouldn't have gotten so crazy about it."

"No, you absolutely should have." Nancy said, shaking her head. "I should have never brought her up. I wasn't thinking and it was stupid. But I promise I'll be more careful."

"I know." He said.

Her smile that had disappeared started to reform. "So... we're good?"

Mike nodded, "Yeah, we're good."

Nancy fully grinned before pulling him into a hug, squeezing his shoulders tightly. He groaned quietly but hardly offered up any protest. Mike made a mental note to himself to check in on Nancy more often. If he was able to open up more about Eleven he was sure she could open up about Barb a bit. Especially since Hopper was working towards getting a story about her out.

"I hope you two weren't making out the *whole* time." She said, still holding onto him.

Mike squirmed out of her grip, cringing at her words. "Oh my god, don't say that." he said. "You think I would ever do that with Hopper in the house?"

Nancy shrugged her shoulders. "It's not like he was in the room."

"Are you trying to encourage me?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, of course not. But I know that if you do you'd never talk to mom or dad about it. And she can't talk to Hopper. Which kind of leaves me and Joyce as the only two available candidates for talking about it." Nancy raised an eyebrow at him. "You guys have been alone, right?"

Mike squirmed, growing increasingly uncomfortable. "Yeah, the day after she closed the gate he went to go check on Will and I stayed with her. But we had way too much to say to each other."

"And you haven't been alone since?"

"Well once in the car for two seconds." Mike said. "But it doesn't matter. I don't think she even knows what making out is. I didn't even know she knew what being boyfriend and girlfriend meant until she brought it up."

Nancy pondered what he said for a moment. "Maybe you should get Joyce to talk to her about it."

Mike scoffed. "No way am I going to ask Joyce to give El the talk so just so she can tell Hopper."

"I could bring it up to her if she ever comes over again." She offered. "You can go to the bathroom or something and I can just ask her if she knows what it is."

"Maybe." He said. "She has other more important things to learn first."

"What a gentleman." She joked. He rolled his eyes at her but she only laughed. "Maybe she already knows. She watches a lot of movies, right? She's bound to have seen something PG 13 by now."

He shrugged. "I guess. But I don't know. I don't wanna make her uncomfortable or anything."

"Yeah, right." Nancy said. "As if anything you could do could make her uncomfortable. She's so in love with you that you can probably do no wrong."

Mike perked up slightly. "You think so?"

"I think she's more in love with you than you are with her."

"That's impossible."

Nancy raised an eyebrow at him. "Didn't she kill a bunch of government agents and a monster from a different dimension for you?"

"For Dustin and Lucas too."

"No. She did that for *you*, idiot."

The phone on her nightstand rang and cut the conversation short. He watched hopefully as Nancy reached over and pick up the receiver, crossing his fingers that it was Eleven. She seemed to know exactly what he was thinking by the way she grinned as she held the phone to her ear. "Hello?" A moment later she held the receiver away from her mouth. "It's your girlfriend."

Mike jumped off the bed and called back to her over his shoulder before bursting out of the hall. "Don't listen in!" He hurried down the hall and quickly closed the door behind him once he reached his room. Mike picked up the phone before collapsing on his bed. "You

can hang up now, Nancy."

"You're welcome."

He heard a short rustling noise that was quickly cut short, the sound of her hanging up. "Hi Mike."

"Hey." He leaned back against his headboard and kept his knees close to his chest. "Did you have fun tonight?"

"Yeah, a lot." She said. If he listened closely he could hear the TV playing in the background. He wondered if she'd told Hopper to put it on so he couldn't hear their conversation. "I liked your parents."

"They know how to make a first impression."

"I know they're not like that always. I saw." She said. Mike felt his cheeks heating up, wondering not for the first time how much she had seen when they were apart. "I'm sorry Mike."

"Why are you sorry?"

"You should have a mom like Joyce. Someone who's nice all the time."

Mike leaned his back against the headboard behind him. "It's okay." He said. "You don't have to worry about me, alright."

"I will anyway."

He sighed. He had certainly been right when he told his mom she was stubborn. "Well don't worry too much, okay? I'm okay, I promise." Mike quickly changed the topic, "The Snow Ball is only three weeks away."

"I know." She said. "I made him get me a calendar."

Mike grinned, imagining Eleven eagerly counting down the days until the dance. "Do you need help getting anything?"

"No, I'm going to ask someone else to help. I want it to be a surprise."

His smile only grew twice in size. "Okay. Who are you going to ask?"

She hummed quietly. "Not sure. Maybe Joyce. Maybe... Max."

He lifted his eyebrows in surprise despite the fact that she wasn't there to see. Though she had warmed up to the idea of Max ever since he told her she'd been mistaken with what she thought she saw in the gym, the two girls had never spent time alone before. Half the time Max didn't tag along with the rest of the party to visit her. Though she always came up with an excuse Mike had a feeling that Max was scared Eleven still didn't like her. Mike had secretly wondered the same.

"Really?" he asked her. "You sure you don't want me to come?"

"Yes. It's girl time, you're not allowed."

Mike laughed and he could hear her do the same on the other line. "Okay, sorry. I won't come."

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm *really* excited."

"Me too."



## 10. Chapter 10

I'm super excited about this cheater and I hope you guys like it.

And happy birthday to my friend David! Thank you for always being so supportive of everything I upload even if it's shit haha. I especially hope you like this chapter

---

Eleven had the phone book open on the counter next to her, the phone pressed between her ear and her shoulder. Since the only person she ever called was Mike she wasn't used to the line ringing so long. She usually only counted three or four rings before he picked up and his familiar voice filled her ears. Eleven was beginning to wonder if she'd called the wrong number. She peered down at the number next to *Hargrove*, which Mike had highlighted or her after telling her that Max didn't have the same last name as her parents. Eleven had been sure she dialed the right one. Maybe she was wrong...

"Hello?"

The voice was male and very deep. She cringed and debated hanging up and trying again. "Um... is Max there?"

She heard the voice, farther away than before, call "Max! Phone!" Eleven leaned against the wall and waited for the voice of the redhead. The longer she waited the more she wanted to just give up and ask Mike to come shopping with her. "Hello?"

"Max?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

She let out a sigh of relief. Finally. "It's Eleven."

"Oh. Hey."

She understood where her confusion was. Though the two girls were now friendly they weren't exactly the best of friends. Max was pretty, and the irrationally jealous part of her brain was convinced that Mike

was going to choose her over Eleven. And Mike was such a catch she doubted anyone would be able to turn him down. Her and Max were friendly, but they'd never had a one on one conversation before. The more she thought about it the more she was beginning to regret her decision to ask Max to come with her.

"What's up?"

Eleven shuffled her feet nervously. What if she said no? What if she didn't want to spend time with her? She wished Mike or Hopper were there to calm her anxieties. "Do you want to go shopping with me? For the Snow Ball?"

"You can go?"

"I don't care if I'm allowed or not. I'm going."

On the other line Max laughed. For such a tomboy she had a very girly and giggly laugh. Eleven smiled at the sound, wishing her laugh sounded just as cute. "Yeah, that sounds cool. I haven't gone shopping either. When do you want to go?"

"Today?" Eleven asked. "My dad can pick you up when he gets home from work."

"Dad?" she asked in the same tone of voice Mike had used when she used the word for the first time in front of him. "When did you start saying that?"

"Last week." She said. "Practicing for when I can go out. It feels weird."

"I bet. What time does he get home from work?"

"Four three zero." She said before quickly correcting herself. "Four thirty."

"Cool. I'll see you then."

Eleven hung up the phone, then simply stood staring at it with an ear to ear grin on her face. She was going to be hanging out with her friend that was a girl. The only person she'd hung out with one on

one before was Mike. She knew she may have been somewhat neglecting her friends. But she was so... infatuated (meaning to attract or hold the attention of, according to the dictionary) with him. She'd heard the word in a movie once and the way the woman looked at the man was like looking in a mirror.

Everything she did made her think of Mike. Eating dinner made her think about how he used to sneak her meals in the basement. Watching movies made her think of the first time she'd ever seen a tv in his living room. Changing into her pajamas made her think not only of the pink dress but of the sweats he'd given her on the night they met. Brushing her hair made her think of the smile he wore when he talked about how surprised he was by her curls. Everything made her think of Mike. Though she wasn't exactly complaining.

She picked the phone back up and dialed the number to Hopper's direct line in his office. Eleven knew she wasn't supposed to call him at work unless it was urgent (requiring immediate action or attention). But she figured that teenage advice was pretty urgent since he always seemed so panicked when she asked for it.

The phone didn't ring quite as long as it did when she called Max. "Hopper." His gruff sounding voice said when he picked up. His voice always sounded so much deeper on the phone.

"I called Max." She said. She had brought it up to him at breakfast before he left for work and expressed some of her worries. He hadn't been very helpful besides telling her to just 'get it over with'.

"Hey, that wasn't so bad was it?" He asked. She could hear the smile in his voice.

"No." Eleven admitted. "I'm nervous."

She expected him to make some excuse about why he had to go, to avoid talking about what she was worried about. He surprised her with his reply. "What are you nervous about?"

She shuffled her feet, leaning against the wall. "I only know boys. I don't know how to have a girl friend."

"Do you wanna know a secret?"

"Yes." She said eagerly.

"You don't have to act differently around boys and girls. Just act the same way around Max as you would with Will or Dustin. And in case you haven't noticed Max isn't exactly a glamor queen."

"Glamor queen?"

"She's not girly. She's a tomboy, like you."

Eleven hummed quietly as she thought over what Hopper said. "I hope she likes me."

"She wouldn't have agreed to hang out with you if she didn't like you. Did you apologize for being so cold when you met her?"

"I told Mike." She said. "I know he told her. Does that count?"

"Sort of." Hopper told her. "You should probably tell her yourself. That's the kind of thing that's best heard from the source."

"Okay."

"Hey, so, uh, I have a surprise for you." He said, easily shifting the conversation. "I got it on my lunch break today."

Eleven perked up. The last time he'd had a surprise for her was a newer and more state of the art radio for her to watch her friends. "What's the surprise?"

"I'll show you when I get home, alright? It'll be worth the wait."

She sure hoped so since she spent the rest of the hour and a half wait for him to get home pacing the house. The tv was on but she hardly paid any attention to it. It served solely as background noise. Eleven eventually settled for hanging upside down on her bed while she listened to the tv in the other room. She had seen the movie that was on way too many times and couldn't be bothered with finding something else to watch. When she heard Hopper's footsteps approaching she rolled off the bed and hurried to the door, the locks

flying open before she even reached it. She stood on the front porch, hugging herself in an attempt to fight off the cold.

"Hey," Hopper said as he came up the stairs, "I'm letting you go out tonight, don't push it by going on the porch without permission."

She muttered a half hearted apology as she walked back inside and leaned against the back of the couch. Eleven watched him take off his coat, anxiously awaiting the surprise. "Well?"

"Hold on, would you?" he said, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out an envelope. "It's not exactly the most exciting present. But it's something."

Eleven eyed him before taking the envelope, doing her best to not rip it open. She pulled out a small piece of paper and was confused by how it could be a present before she read it.

*State of Indiana certificate of birth*

*Name: Jane Hopper*

*Was born in: Hawkins*

*Child of: Teresa Ives and James Hopper*

*On the date of: March 10th 1971*

Eleven gaped at the paper, utterly speechless. They'd been working towards the paperwork to make her existence official for weeks. It was hard to believe that a confirmation of their work was right there in her hands. She had a birth certificate. She had a *birthday*. She'd never had a birthday before. Eleven felt tears forming in her eyes and she had to shut them before the tears dripped onto the paper and ruined it.

As much as Hopper and her friends had been trying to make her feel like a normal teenager they'd never quite succeeded. How could she possibly feel like a normal teenager? She had telekinetic abilities and her name was a number branded into her arm. There was no proof she even existed. If something happened to her she would simply disappear into nothing more than her friends' memories. How could

she be a normal teenager when she wasn't even a registered human being?

Holding the certificate in her hand, complete not only with parents but with a birthday and a real name, she finally felt real. Like something besides Mike had her grounded in Hawkins. It was her birthplace. Her father was there. It was where she belonged, no matter how scared she was of the place she'd lived the first 12 years of her life. Hawkins was her home whether it was in the woods, in Mike's basement, or in the cabin with Hopper.

She looked up at him, blinking back the tears that were beginning to form in her eyes. With the certificate still tightly gripped in her hand she went over to him and locked her arms around his waist. Hopper wasn't exactly warm and fuzzy but he hugged her back like she was his own daughter, and not just on paper.

"Thanks dad." She said, the word feeling slightly less weird in her mouth than it had the past couple of times she'd used it.

"No problem," he said, "Jane."

Jane. She and Hopper had talked about going to visit her mamma and aunt Becky when she was allowed to go out more and outside of town. Eleven had the courage to check on her mother in the void, too scared to face the state that the person who had given birth to her was in. It was a hard sight to stomach. But she knew she would have to eventually. Especially since so much had happened since she last saw her. Her mother didn't even know about her boyfriend.

Hopper patted her back, "Alright, get ready to go? We got to pick your friend up soon, right?"

Eleven hurried into the other room, throwing a sweater on top of her t-shirt and pulling on her sneakers that were getting more use than she expected. She pulled on her winter jacket before hurrying out of the cabin and after Hopper, starting the walk to the truck.

"You still nervous?" he asked her as they walked. She could see his hand hovering over his pocket where his cigarettes were. He didn't like smoking in front of her and she knew it. As if she cared.

"Yes." She admitted. "Saying sorry is hard. I don't want to do it wrong."

He glanced over at her, tilting his head down since she was much shorter. "You wanna practice on me?"

For a moment she thought the idea was silly. He was much easier to talk to than Max. At least she had more practice talking to him. But she remembered how he had made Mike practice in the car a few times. Maybe it actually helped. "Yes."

"Go for it, kid."

Eleven sucked a breath into her lungs, her exhale coming out like smoke. "I'm sorry for pushing you off your board and being mean to you when we met. It was stupid."

"Tell her why you did it."

"I did it because..." Eleven's voice faltered. She felt weird talking about Mike in front of Hopper. Embarrassed wasn't the right word. She would never be embarrassed about Mike. But she felt... bashful. Private. Anxious he would judge her. But she was practicing. She angled her head away from him and pretended the footsteps next to her belonged to Max. "I'm sorry for pushing you off your board and being mean to you when we met. I did it because I saw you with Mike and I thought... he forgot about me and liked you better. I was scared."

She felt Hopper's hand land on her shoulder and she looked back up at him. "Good job. Say that." He told her. "And let me tell you something as your dad, okay?" Eleven nodded. "Don't be so worried about Mike, alright? I know you're scared but someone who's that dedicated to you when you're not even around isn't going to drop you the second he sees another pretty girl. You don't get as depressed as he did when you were gone over some little crush."

"Crush?"

"Puppy love." He explained. "Something fleeting that doesn't last. AKA not how Mike feels about you." Hopper flashed her one of his

rare smiles. "So relax, alright? I don't think he's going anywhere anytime soon."

Eleven felt her face get warm and a smile take over her face. She didn't want him going anywhere ever.

As they drove to Max's house Eleven recited what she was going to say in her head over and over again. She wanted to get it right. She wanted to be Max's friend. Now that she knew that there was nothing between her and Mike she had no problem with her. When they pulled up in front of her house she glanced over at Hopper, silently asking for permission to go knock on the door. He nodded, silently agreeing.

She flung the door open and practically ran up the lawn. Eleven banged her fist against the door, bouncing up and down while she waited for a familiar head of red hair to appear. She heard some voices from inside, followed by footsteps, before the front door opened and her almost-friend stood in front of her. Eleven couldn't hold back a smile as Max stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind her.

"Hi."

"Hey." If Max was nervous she didn't seem it.

They started towards Hopper's car down on the street but Eleven stopped her about halfway down the lawn, grabbing her wrist to keep her from walking away. She swallowed a nervous lump in her throat and practically had to spit the words out. "Um, I just wanted to say... I'm sorry."

Max raised a red eyebrow at her. "What for?"

"For pushing you off your board and being mean when we met." Eleven explained.

Before she could continue Max waved her off. "It's cool, don't worry. Your boyfriend explained it to me. Don't be scared, I'm not trying to steal your man."

Hearing someone else besides Mike refer to him as her boyfriend



made her insides go warm. "I always knew that he knew other girls. But I never saw him with any. I was scared."

"Even if I was interested in Wheeler- which I'm absolutely not, no offense- he wouldn't even give me a second glance. Not when he has you." Max said before bumping her shoulder against Eleven's. "I'll help you pick out something really nice for him."

The ride to the mall, a place she had experienced exclusively through movies, was mostly quiet except for the radio. When Hopper pulled into a parking space he turned to look at them in the back seat before they could get out. "Just a few rules before we go in, okay?"

Eleven crossed her arms and leaned back against the seat. "Always rules." She muttered.

He ignored her. "I'm going to give you guys some space but I'm going to be there the whole time. Don't try and sneak off and lose me. This is a big place and I need to know where you are. And your name is *Jane*. This is your trial run for going out in public and you don't wanna screw it up."

"She won't." Max said for her, reaching for the door handle and pushing it open. "You think she'd mess up when the Snow Ball is so close?"

Eleven wasn't planning on screwing up. Not going to the Snow Ball simply wasn't an option.

The mall was like an entirely other world. No movie could have ever prepared her for stepping into the mall for the first time. It was packed with more people than she had ever seen her entire life. Teens of various ages wearing brightly colored and trendy clothes were wandering around. Store fronts were filled with clothes Eleven had only ever seen on tv, certainly not in her dresser.

She felt like a fish out of water and had no idea what to do. She glanced over at Max, a silent plea for help. Max grinned at her and held onto her arm, pulling her farther into the mall. "Come on, let's go to Macy's."

Eleven's eyes were wide like a deer in headlights as she followed Max through the mall. Before stepping inside she had been annoyed that Hopper was going to go with them and only give them some privacy. But now that she was there she kept glancing over her shoulder to make sure he was still behind them. "It's so big." She said to Max, struggling to keep up with her.

"The one in California is even bigger." Max told her. How could there possibly be a *bigger* building? "Don't worry, you'll figure it out soon. You and Wheeler will be coming here on dates in no time."

The thought made Eleven smile. Not necessarily at the idea of coming back to such a huge place but that she and Mike would be able to go out freely one day. "You think?" she asked.

"I know."

They made their way to a store at the back of the mall that went back farther than she could reach. Eleven's eyes lingered on the makeup and shoes and other clothes they passed as Max led her towards the dresses towards the back of the store. How was she supposed to find something in such a huge place? What if she didn't end up finding something she liked? Would she be able to borrow something from Max or Nancy?

When they made it to the dress section Max started looking through the hangers while Eleven ran her fingers along a neon one with a mesh fabric. "What kind of dresses do you like?"

Eleven shrugged her shoulders. "I only wore one. A pink one. It was Nancy's."

Max smirked and looked back down at the dresses. "You want another pink one?"

She shook her head, "No. Something different."

They decided to start by narrowing down their options by color, length, and fit. Eleven decided she wanted a dress in either blue, yellow, or purple. Length she didn't necessarily care about but Max advised her that, for Hopper's sake, they could pick out something on

the longer side. She didn't understand the concept of different fits so Max decided to take over that aspect.

Together they picked out over ten dresses for Eleven to try on. She quickly came to the conclusion that yellow wasn't her color and ditched all the yellow dresses onto the rack in the dressing room. Eleven came out into the hallway and collapsed against the wall after trying on the eight dress.

"Hey, that looks great." Max said with false enthusiasm.

"I look like an eggplant." Eleven pouted, glancing in the mirror and groaning at her reflection. "I'll never find one."

"You still have five dresses to try on, don't give up." Max pushed off the wall and looked through the ones she'd yet to try on.

Eleven reluctantly followed her back into the dressing room that made her feel slightly claustrophobic. "I want the night to be special." She said, "But what if I can't find anything to wear? I want to look pretty."

"You'll find something." Max assured her, sounding so confident. "And I'll let you in on a secret, *Jane*." They both smiled. "It doesn't matter if you show up in a garbage bag. Mike is still gonna think you're the hottest girl there."

"Maybe." Eleven muttered.

Max turned towards her, a red eyebrow raised. "What do you mean 'maybe'. *Absolutely*. He's totally in love with you. You know that, right?"

She shrugged.

"You do know what love means, don't you?"

"I think so."

Max sighed and leaned against the wall across from her. "So there's different kinds of love. There's love that you have for your family, like Hopper. He may annoy the shit out of you but he's still really

important to you. Then there's love for your friends, which is kind of similar to love for your family. Dustin's the most annoying person I know, but if anything ever happened to him I'd be devastated."

"Devastated?"

"Really upset."

Eleven got the feeling Max wasn't very good at admitting she cared about people. She felt special that Max was admitting it to her. "What about boyfriend and girlfriend love?"

"Well boyfriends and girlfriends can like each other, but they can also love each other." Max explained. "When they just like each other they get butterflies in their stomach when they see each other, and they want to be together for a while. But when they love each other they want to be together forever. When you love someone you aren't able to see yourself with anyone else. And you would do anything for them." She paused, "Kind of like you and Mike, right?"

*Love.* After a year she finally had a word to describe the way she felt about Mike Wheeler. The first person to show her kindness and respect. Who she had been ready to die for after only knowing him for a week. Who she had wanted to protect so badly that she let him go, ready to never see him again despite how badly she needed him. She blinked at Max a few times, feeling at a loss for words for a moment.

"Do you think..." her voice trailed off and she had to gather the courage to admit her worry out loud. "Do you think he loves me?"

Max let out a laugh, "Oh, I *know* he loves you." She said. "I know I wasn't around last year to see you two together but I've known he's in love with you since the night you closed the gate."

"Really?"

She nodded, "Yup. He was a mess while he was waiting for you to get back. You wanna know what he said to me that night?"

"Yes." She said eagerly.

"He said 'Have you ever met someone and know by the end of the day that you just *need* them to be in your life? Or feel like you can't breathe when you're not with them? Like suddenly you need them more than you need oxygen.' Then he told me about how you killed the Demogorgon and he cried until you got back."

Eleven wanted to bolt out of the dressing room and run all the way to his house. She wanted to hold him until every ounce of his pain went away. She wanted to reach into his brain and take out the memory of their time apart so he'd never have to worry about her leaving again. Eleven loved him so much that her body hurt and craved to be near him. She pressed her back against the wall to keep her planted in her spot. "Wow."

"Yeah." Max agreed. "So trust me it doesn't matter what you wear to the Snow Ball. Mike is going to love it. Now try on the next one."

Eleven moved somewhat in a daze as she tried on the next dress, a grey-ish blue one with pink along the hems. The only thing she could really focus on was that she finally had the word she had been searching for for a year. Love. She loved Mike Wheeler.

xXx

When she got back home to the cabin Eleven dropped her shopping bags on the kitchen table and headed straight for the phone. Hopper knew the drill and went into the small second bedroom to give her some space. She dialed the number she knew by heart and waited for her boyfriend's voice to fill her ears. Excited butterflies filled her stomach while the line rang.

"Hello?"

A smile immediately took over her face. "Hi Mike."

"Hey El." He said. They'd had enough phone calls for her to know the way his voice sounded when he was smiling. "How was the mall?"

"Scary. Really big. I thought I was going to get lost."

"Did you?"

"No, Max stayed with me the whole time. I like her."

"She's not so bad."

"No. I think she's my friend now."

"That's awesome."

"Mike?"

"Yes?"

*I love you. I love you more than I love anything in the world. I think you're extraordinary and wonderful and perfect. I never want anyone else to be my boyfriend. I want you to be mine for the rest of my life, until we get old and look like raisins and can't hear each other anymore.*

"I'm really excited for the Snow Ball."

## 11. Chapter 11

One scene of this chapter was definitely inspired by my friend FangirlingStrangerThings and the wonderful story The Life You Deserve. Check it out if you haven't already it's amazing.

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Mike sat at a table by himself in the school gymnasium feeling somewhat miserable. All around him his friends were dancing (Lucas with Max, Will with Jennifer, Dustin with... Nancy) and having a good time, but his mind was stuck on a cabin in the woods rather than the school gym. Last time he'd checked Hopper was letting Eleven come. Had he changed his mind? Had they gotten in a fight? Had something happened to her. His leg bounced up and down nervously and his palms started turning clammy as he waited for his girlfriend to show up.

They hadn't discussed what time she would arrive so Mike figured it would be best to get there as early as possible so that when she did show up she wouldn't be alone. Looking back he regretted showing up so early. He'd been at the dance for an hour and a half and spent every moment since he walked in the door waiting for Eleven (Jane for the night) to show up.

If Hopper changed his mind last minute he was going to lose it. Mike wasn't the only one who had been looking forward to the night. It was clear every time the night of

December 15th came up in conversation that Eleven was planning on going. His mind forced an image of a heart broken Eleven being told she wasn't allowed to go out. An image that made him feel sick. Mike decided that if she didn't show up in ten minutes he would find a phone to call the cabin and if she was forced to stay inside he would go see her and try to cheer her up. He loved his friends but he saw no point in staying at the dance if she wasn't allowed to go.

Mike's eyes wandered around the gymnasium, watching the other students their age. He had never once wished anything about Eleven was different. She was perfect the way she was. But Mike wished that the rules were different. That she didn't have to worry about people from the lab hunting her down or keeping one of the coolest things

about her a secret. He wanted her to have a normal adolescence. Even if it was just for one night she deserved to not be so worried about everything.

The gymnasium doors swung open and for a millisecond Mike didn't recognize the girl that walked in. She just looked so... grown up. Her usually tight curls had loosened into waves that framed her face. Purple eyeshadow and a coat of lip gloss only made her look even more different. But he'd recognize her anywhere.

Mike's legs lifted him into a standing position on their own accord. He knew his mouth was hanging open but couldn't do anything to change it. Her eyes locked with his across the room and an uncertain smile spread on her face. She was nervous, he could just tell. Nervous that she would do something wrong, nervous that other people would think she was a freak, always nervous about something.

Instincts carried him over to her across the room, a magnetic pull within her always keeping him close. Close up she was even more beautiful. He could see the pink of her cheeks and the mascara on her eye lashes. More importantly he could see the wonder in her eyes as she looked both at him and the room they stood in. It had looked much different the last time she'd been there.

"You look beautiful." He said, but beautiful could only begin to describe how she looked. Her cheeks turned pink and she moved her gaze down, only for a moment, before meeting his again. "Do you want to dance?"

Her smile fell and she glanced out at the rest of the students on the dancefloor. "I... don't know how." She admitted, her voice mixed with anxiety and a bit of shame.

"I don't either." He said, quick to assure her that she wasn't alone. "Do you wanna figure it out."

Her smile once again returned as she nodded her head. Mike reached for her hand, which he'd been itching to do since he spotted her, and pulled her out into the sea of dancing students. Slowly the world began to disappear until there was only Eleven. Only Eleven and her hands on his shoulders and his on her waist.



xXx

Mike was hardly paying attention to the conversation going on around him, more focused on Eleven as she danced with Max to a Cindi Lauper song. Ever since their trip to the mall they'd been as inseparable as she and Mike were. Max came with them to every cabin visit and was the only one allowed in Eleven's room, where her dress for the dance was. They would exchange knowing glances with one another for seemingly no reason, like they were part of some kind of inside joke that the guys weren't. It made Mike wonder what they talked about at the mall.

"Mike!"

He turned towards his friends at the sound of Dustin's voice, snapping himself out of his own thoughts. "Sorry, what?"

Though Dustin and Lucas rolled their eyes Will only laughed. "I asked if you guys wanted to come by my house for dinner tonight. My mom's asking Hopper if Eleven can go too."

Mike figured of Eleven would be able to go to a school dance full of strangers she'd be able to go to the Byers house. "Yeah sure." He got to his feet. "I'm getting something to drink, you want anything?"

Dustin and Lucas shook their head but Will stood up. "I'll come with you."

They weaved through the crowd of students to get to the snack table on the opposite side of the room. On the way he caught Eleven's eye and she practically beamed at him before she continued dancing with Max. He and Will reached the snack table and Mike glanced over at his friend as he poured his cup. "You have fun dancing with Jennifer?"

Will shrugged, grabbing a cup of his own. "I guess. She's cool. But she's... not my type."

"You don't like brunettes?" he joked.

"Not quite."

Mike knew what he meant. He'd known for a while. Exactly how long he wasn't sure. A while. "Yeah, I know." Mike said.

Will looked over at him. "You know?"

"Yeah." Mike told him. "It's okay."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Will let out a sigh of relief. "It's hard, Mike." He said. "No one knows. I mean, I haven't said it to anyone before. My mom probably knows. Johnathan too. But I don't think I can say it."

"So don't." Mike poured punch into Will's empty cup. "It doesn't really matter, you know? It doesn't matter what you are. You're just Will. You're my best friend."

A smile spread on Will's face and he took a sip from his cup. "What about Jane?"

"She's my girlfriend, that's something else. You're like a brother to me. Your skin could be green and I'd still love you."

Will smirked, "What if I was purple?"

"I'd have to think about it."

They burst out laughing and suddenly Will seemed more relaxed. Mike could only begin to wonder what Will had gone through to keep something like that to himself. It was something Will shouldn't have had to deal with alone. Mike was glad that, in his own way, he had told him. That he wouldn't have to deal with it alone. Even if no one else knew. He had secrets with every one of his friends (the secret of Kali with Eleven, the secret of how he and Max had gotten on good terms with each other, the secret that he and Dustin had cheated at D&D back in September). It was just another secret he'd have with Will.

"Incoming." His friend said as he looked towards the dance floor.

Mike turned just in time to see Max headed straight for them. Her face was flushed and she was breathing heavily from dancing. He glanced behind her and saw Eleven headed towards the table where

their friends were. When Max reached them she grabbed a cup from the table and practically chugged it. She tossed it in the garbage when she was done and looked at him. "Walk with me Wheeler."

Mike glanced at Will, uncertain of what to think. Will just shrugged at him very unhelpfully. "Uh, yeah, okay." Mike said, falling into step next to Max. They were careful to walk close to the wall so they wouldn't get too close to the dancers. "So, uh, what's up?" "Have you told Jane you love her yet?"

"That was blunt."

Max laughed and bumped her shoulder against his. "No beating around the bush, this is important business." She said. It was weird to think that in the very same room Mike had told her she was annoying and that there wasn't room in the party for her. Had he not been so threatened by her presence he might have seen how cool she was from the beginning. "So why haven't you?"

"How do you know I do?"

"Everyone knows."

"I don't know." He said, which sounded lame so he searched for a better answer. "I don't wanna scare her off. And I don't know if she even really understands what it means."

Max laughed again, "Oh she understands."

Mike glanced over at her, "Really?"

"Yeah. You're welcome."

"So that's what you guys talked about?" he asked. "Don't girls have anything better to talk about? Like makeup and periods?"

This time they both burst out laughing. "Like I would ever talk about makeup. And

I don't think Jane has gotten hers yet."

"TMI, Max."

"So you don't want me to tell you when she gets it?"

"Absolutely not."

"Cut the shit Mike." Max stopped walking and turned to face him. It was weird to hear her call him by his first name. "She understands what love is. And you wouldn't scare her off by telling her. Not to put words in her mouth or anything but I don't think you're the only love sick one here."

"You think she's in love with me?"

"You *don't*?"

"I don't know." Mike admitted. "It's just hard to believe."

"*Why?*"

"I just don't know what she sees in me, okay?" he half shouted. "Sometimes I wonder if she would still be interested in me if I wasn't the one who rescued her from the woods. I mean she's the coolest person in the world and I'm just... me."

Max rolled her eyes at him. "Oh knock it off with the pity party, Mike. Just because people think you're shit doesn't mean you actually are." She said, half shouting back at him. "You ever think that maybe the reason you found her in the woods is because you guys would fall in love, not the other way around?"

"You don't seem like the type to believe in fate."

"You do."

"I never said I don't."

"Neither did I." Max pointed at the table where Eleven sat. "That girl loves you and it shouldn't matter why. So suck it up and tell her so she can stop worrying that you're going to find someone else."

Mike glanced at Eleven while she laughed at something Dustin said. "She really thinks that?"

"She really does."

"I love El but that's the stupidest thing she's ever said."

xXx

"Excuse me, I don't think I've seen you around before."

The table fell quiet as one of the popular boys, Ryan, approached them. Mike could tell immediately what was happening when he stood in Eleven's field of vision and attempted to strike up a conversation. The only people that had spoken to her were a few girls that complimented her on her dress and asked what her name was. Other than that Eleven had managed to stick with their group.

Eleven glanced at Mike, whose hand she held underneath the table, before looking up at Ryan. The whole table watched her cautiously, all of them preparing for the worst. "I'm homeschooled." She answered.

"Oh, that's cool." He said, flashing her what was supposed to be a charming smile. It just looked fake. "I'm Ryan. What's your name?"

"Jane."

"That's a nice name." his expression fell slightly as he looked at the rest of the group. "How do you know these guys?"

"Family friends." She said, saying the story they'd all been practicing.

"Oh. Well, if you ever want some better friends all you gotta do is find me. A pretty girl like you doesn't have to be tied down to the first nerds she sees."

Her hand slipped from Mike's as she stood up and turned to face Ryan. Even in a dress and makeup there was still something incredibly intimidating about her when her expression hardened. "Don't talk about them like that."

"Jane, it's fine." Mike said, quickly getting to his feet and reaching for her hand again. "Just let it go."

"Yeah, relax, it was just a joke." Ryan said.

"Well it wasn't very funny." Eleven said. "I don't like people saying mean things about my friends. Or my boyfriend."

Ryan's gaze moved back and forth between her and Mike and their hands, slowly piecing together what she was saying. "Woah, seriously?" he asked, gaping at them. "You're Wheeler's girlfriend."

"Take a picture Ryan, it'll last longer!" Max shouted from the table behind them.

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Whatever, Mayfield. See you losers next year."

Eleven's eyes remained glued on Ryan's back until he disappeared into the sea of students. Once he was gone she turned towards Mike, her expression softening slightly. Her hand was still in his and she gave him a light squeeze of reassurance. "He shouldn't talk to you like that."

"It's fine, El."

"We're used to it." Dustin chimed in.

Eleven shook her head, "But it's not okay."

"It's just the way things are." Lucas said.

Mike pulled at her hand to get her attention. He could tell she was only getting fired up again at the idea that it happened often. "Hey, you wanna go outside? Blow off some steam?"

Eleven nodded and their friends made kissy noises at them as they walked away, making both their faces turn red. She walked close to his side as they made their way out the gymnasium doors. She told him that Hopper was waiting outside in the parking lot with Joyce so they decided to walk through the hallway instead. Half of the lights were turned off, giving the hallway an eerie sort of vibe that was way too familiar in an unsettling type of way.

"I know what you're thinking." Eleven said, breaking the comfortable silence. "Stop worrying. There's no bad men. Tonight is supposed to

be fun."

Mike smiled. It wouldn't surprise him if some of her powers involved mind reading. "Tonight is fun. I just have a tendency to worry."

"I know." She said, her shoulder brushing against hers. "I've thought about tonight a lot."

"Is it everything you hoped?"

A wide grin spread on her face. "Yes. Except for that guy."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Don't even worry about him. It's seriously not a big deal, El."

"I don't like when people talk to you like that. I know it makes you sad." She said. "I wish other people would see how good you are."

He felt his face turning pink. "I don't care what other people think of me. I care about what you and our friends think of me."

"Still." She said, not sounding at all convinced. "It makes me sad too."

They stepped into the cafeteria, the lights just as dull as they were in the hallway. A small, nostalgic smile spread on her face as she looked around the room and he knew he didn't need to ask if she remembered where they were. Their footsteps echoed and bounced off the walls as they wandered through the room and over to a familiar table.

"Is it true what Nancy said at dinner at your house?" she asked him. "That you said you didn't like me?"

"Honestly?" Eleven nodded. "I said it was gross. I was in denial and didn't want to admit it. Especially not to Nancy."

"But you were lying?"

Mike laughed. "Of course I was lying. I already really liked you, I was just too afraid to admit it."

She smiled and sat on top of the table. "I understand." She said,

crossing her legs underneath her.

He came over, putting his hands on the table on either side of her waist. "You always understand."

"Not always."

Mike stepped towards her, his hands itching to touch her and his lips itching to kiss her. He closed the distance between them and pressed his forehead against hers. Perhaps it had nothing to do with her powers that made Eleven able to read his mind. Mike was sometimes sure he could read hers. He knew how important the night was to her, even more so than it was to him. And he knew she meant it when she said the night was everything she'd hoped for.

"Do you know how important you are to me?" he asked, his hands inching towards her hips.

"I think so." She said, barely above a whisper.

"Good." He said. "I don't want anyone else, El. You're it for me."

"No one else?"

"No one else. Ever."

Mike leaned in and kissed her. He felt he'd displayed incredible self control by holding himself back the whole night. Eleven's hands rested on the back of his neck, her fingertips disappearing into his hair that was due to be cut soon. The conversation he'd had with Max replayed in his mind, which wasn't exactly what he wanted to be thinking out while kissing his girlfriend. *That girl loves you and it shouldn't matter why.* Maybe it didn't. Either way he wasn't sure he had the courage to say it yet. Always afraid of her rejection. Always afraid of scaring her off. Always afraid he was misinterpreting her.

Mike decided not to think, not to worry, at least for a little while. Which was easy to do when Eleven grabbed the collar of his jacket and pulled him closer to her. Her lip gloss tasted like artificial strawberries and her dress still smelled new, like the mall. It was a very different side of her that he wasn't used to. But one he didn't at all mind.



Eleven was like a chameleon. He had seen her scared and drenched in rain water, her head shaved and wearing an oversized t-shirt from Benny's. He had seen her in Nancy's old dress and his grandmothers wig, feeling pretty for the first time in her life. He had seen her dressed head to toe in black with gelled down curls and in oversized jeans and flannels that Hopper bought her. It didn't seem to matter what she looked like, she was constantly surprising him with the fact that she could look good in anything.

They pulled away from the kiss and each took a breath. Her skin had turned as warm as his own and the sight of her pink cheeks was adorable. "You know what?"

"What?" she asked.

"One day you'll be able to sit in the cafeteria and have lunch with us. At school. But not here, at the high school."

Eleven deflated slightly, her fingers brushing the back of his neck. "I don't know, Mike."

"I do." He said. "The wait is hard. And annoying. But it'll be worth it. Soon you'll be able to leave the cabin and not have to worry about anything. You can do whatever you want."

"And we can go on dates?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah, of course." He said, already excited about the idea himself. "What's the first date you want to go on?"

"I want to see a movie. In the theatre, not on tv." Eleven said, her smile growing more and more.

"We can do that. What else."

Her cheeks turned even more pink. "I think we should see the movie twice. I heard people kiss in movie theatres but I don't like missing scenes so we can kiss the second time we see it."

Mike laughed, "Yeah, alright. We'll see it twice. I'll try very hard to restrain myself the first time."

"You better." She joked. "I'll move my seat if you make me miss too much." Eleven grinned even wider, her fingers running across his shirt collar. "We should kiss more."

"We should."

"I wish we were alone more." Eleven said, "Not just for kissing. We used to be alone all the time, now it's never."

Mike knew exactly what she meant. They used to spend hours every day alone in his basement. He should have made a move on her sooner and taken advantage of that time alone. It would have been much more convenient than sneaking kisses in the car and down the hall from their parents. They made it work. They always did. It just wasn't always easy.

"We'll get to be alone more." Mike assured her. "I promise we will."

"When? When we're old?"

He laughed, half out of humor and half out of relief that she intended on still being with him when they were old. "Yeah, then too. But sooner. I don't know when exactly but it'll happen."

"I know." She said. "I'm impatient."

"I'll be patient for the both of us, then."

"Mike?"

"Hm?"

"Kiss me again."

He gladly did as he was told.

## 12. Chapter 12

As always I hope you enjoy this chapter! It's a bit shorter but consider this the calm before the storm ;)

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"Dustin if you ordered pineapple on the pizza I'm going to kick your ass."

"It's an underrated topping."

"My god can you guys stop fighting for *one night*?"

Mike and Eleven shared a glance, both laughing to themselves at their friends constant bickering. Joyce and Hopper had left only a few minutes earlier to pick up the pizza they'd ordered on the phone as well as a few drinks. And not the kind of drinks Nancy and Johnathan were having with their friends. Their friends were spread across the room, Lucas and Max on the couch, Dustin and Will on the floor, and Mike and Eleven squeezed into the same armchair. Not that he minded her legs draped over his lap or her head rested on his shoulder. He didn't mind at all.

"So El," Will asked the shift the conversation from Max and Dustin's argument. "What did you think of your first night at school?"

"I've been at school before." She said.

"Yeah but not with other people there." Lucas pointed out. "Is that the most people you've been around?"

She shook her head, her curls starting to tighten as the night progressed. "No, the mall was more." She said. "But still a lot. Kind of stressful."

"There won't be as many people at school." Mike told her, attempting to ease some of her worries. "I mean they'll all be in the building. But during class there's only fifteen people in a room. And at lunch they everyone's separated by grade."

Eleven sat up. "Grade. That's age, right?"

"Sort of. People can be held back a grade or skip one. But usually everyone's in the same age, yeah."

She glanced around the room, her expression growing nervous. "And will I... be with you guys?"

"Of course you will." Max answered before he got the chance to. "We'll help you catch up. And if you're behind a grade I'll flunk a year and stay with you."

Eleven laughed, shaking her head. "Don't. I want to catch up." She sat up and pushed herself to her feet, smoothing out her dress once she was standing. "I'm getting water." She said before going into the kitchen down the hall.

Once she left the room Mike could feel Max's eyes on him. "She will catch up to us?" she asked once she was sure Eleven was out of ear shot. "Won't she?"

He saw Dustin and Will exchange a look. It was a worry that had been on Mike's mind ever since Hopper clued them in that Eleven going to school was a goal. A long term one, but still a goal. He shouldn't have been so surprised that they were worried too. Mike looked at their faces, seeing some of his own anxiety mirrored in them. They wanted her to succeed just as much as he did. They wanted her to be able to do normal things, like go to the arcade with them or go on bike rides.

Mike planned on doing everything in his power to make sure Eleven had the kind of life she deserved to have. She wanted to go to school, he would help her go to school. She wanted to ride a bike, he would teach her. She wanted him to jump, he'd ask how high. He would do anything for Eleven. But what if he couldn't do enough?

He pushed his worries out of his mind as best he could. There was no room in the night for worrying. Tomorrow he would go back to his usual anxious mess. But he'd waited too long for the Snow Ball and he wasn't going to let anything ruin his night.

Mike looked at his friends, returning to the present, and shook his head. "She'll catch up." He said, assuring both them and himself.

"She's smart and stubborn. She'll do it." He hesitated before pushing himself up off the chair. "I'm gonna go check on her."

Turning into the kitchen he spotted Eleven leaning against the counter, holding a glass of water in her hand while she stared off into space. He immediately picked up on something in her mood. She didn't notice him until he was halfway across the room. Eleven straightened up and set her glass down behind her. "Hi."

"Hey." He said, leaning next to her once he reached her. "You okay"

She simply shrugged in response.

"You wanna go outside?" he asked her, "Go get some air?"

"Yes."

She held onto his hand as they made their way out the back door and sat on the steps out in the yard. The air was bitter and cold but she didn't seem to mind so he didn't plan on complaining. At least it wasn't snowing. Though they had more room they sat at close together as they had on the armchair. Her arm was wrapped around his and her head was rested on his shoulder, some of her curls ticking his next. She puffed her breath out so she could see it in the air and smiled to herself.

"You having fun tonight?" Mike asked, though he was pretty sure he already knew the answer.

She nodded, not bothering to pick her head up. "A lot. I'm really happy."

Mike glanced down at her, but something in her expression put a small frown on his face. He couldn't describe what it was he saw. Maybe it was just intuition. But there was something on his mind. He nudged his foot against hers. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing." she said. Before he got the chance to push her further she sighed and picked her head up, propping her chin on her hand. "Just feel... guilty."

His eyes went wide and he turned to face her. "Guilty?" Mike asked,

"Why El? What's wrong?"

Her gaze didn't quite meet his, instead looking out at the shed in the backyard. "Because I want to be the perfect girlfriend. But I have to stay inside unless it's a 'special occasion'. Don't you want someone who can go out and do stuff with?"

Mike immediately shook his head. "No, El. I want *you*. I would come visit you in that cabin forever if you were never allowed to go outside. But you will. And you'll go to school and come to the arcade with us. And you won't have to worry about the lab ever again."

A small, sad looking smile made its way onto her face. "You don't know that."

"Yeah, El, I do." He said, "Even if I have to find all of them myself."

She tore her eyes away from the shed to look at him and he could see words forming in her mouth. Eleven always got a certain look on her face when she was about to say something she didn't really want to. Her lips got pouty and something in her eyes were sort of far away. Her fingers always got fidgety and sometimes her leg bounced up and down. Mike could see clear as day that there was something on her mind. But he knew the second her posture deflated when she let out a sigh that she wasn't going to say it.

"I don't know, Mike." She said instead propping her chin in her elbow. "I want to believe it. But don't want to get my hopes up."

Mike scooted closer to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. Eleven leaned into his chest, the back of her head resting in his neck. They always fit together like a two piece puzzle. It was hard to imagine that he had lived 13 of his 14 year life without her. He'd been so oblivious to how much he was missing out on before they met. Now he couldn't imagine living his life without her.

"I know it's scary, El." He said, rubbing her arm. "But I promise I'm gonna be here for you the whole time."

She tilted her head up slightly to look at him. "How do you know?"

Mike sighed quietly, knowing she was close enough to hear it. His

conversation with Max earlier that night echoed in his head. They'd talked about him. She'd heavily hinted that Eleven told her she loved him. Yet he couldn't shake the self-doubt and anxiety that somehow he would ruin things with her if he said how he really felt. There was nothing he wouldn't do for Eleven, including keeping quiet about his feelings.

Yet, on the other hand, she deserved to know just how much she meant to him. She made him feel like he was truly something special. It was hard not to when she looked at him like he was the only person in the room. She left an impact on him like a meteor hurtling towards earth at several hundred miles per hour. Eleven had imprinted herself on every aspect of his life.

It was clear she was self-conscious of her importance to him. He had the words to sooth her worries. But he couldn't shake the worry that saying them out loud would ruin anything.

"I know because I'm never gonna give up on you, okay?" he said, slowly working up the courage to say what had been on his mind for weeks. "You're everything to me, El. I love you."

Eleven straightened up, turning to face him. Her wide hazel eyes rapidly scanned his face, likely looking for any sign that he didn't mean what he said. After a few moments her face exploded into a wide smile and her eyes light up like lightbulbs. The anxiety he'd experienced for weeks as he tried to work up the courage to tell her was worth it in an instant when he saw the look on her face.

"I love you too." She said, her voice quiet and coy sounding. It reminded him of the way she'd sounded the day she saved him and Dustin from Troy, when she worried she wasn't as pretty without the blonde wig. Mike grinned wider not only at the sound of her voice but at the memory.

Eleven closed the distance between them and pressed her lips against his. Something about touching her was so much better when she reached for him first. Her actions were laced with the silent message that she wanted him just as much as he did her. The more time they spent together the bolder she became. She became riskier with kisses when Hopper or their friends were around, simply shrugging when

he pointed out the possibility of them getting caught.

Mike could feel the smile on her lips as he kissed her and he mentally scolded himself for taking so long to tell her. Hindsight was 20/20, and she was realizing how foolish he had been to think that she didn't love him. She saved him from jumping to his certain death at the quarry. She risked her life to save him and his friends from the men at the lab and the Demogorgon. She listened to him call her every night. She left the safety of Hopper's cabin because she missed him and, despite thinking he had moved on, came back to Hawkins because he was in trouble. Mike truly had the most amazing girlfriend in the world.

Eleven beamed at him when she pulled away, her arms wrapped around his neck and her fingers lightly running through his hair. Mike pushed away some of her hair that had started to tighten back into its normal curls. "I promise you'll be able to do normal stuff, okay? And in the mean time we'll just make it work like always."

Eleven nodded, her smile wavering by only a fraction. "Make it work." She repeated.

From outside on the back steps they could hear the front door of the house opening and closing, followed by Joyce's voice announcing the pizza was ready. They exchanged a glance, both excited for the food but disappointed they couldn't spend any more time alone, before standing up and heading back inside. They reentered the kitchen in time to see Joyce set two large pizza boxes on the table while Will and Lucas retrieved cups, plates, and utensils from the cabinets. Out of the corner of his eye Mike saw Eleven inhale the scent of the food and wondered if she'd eaten at all that night, then instantly felt guilty for not making sure she had something at the Snow Ball.

Just as he pulled a chair out next to her he felt a hand land on his shoulder, looking up to find Hopper next to him. "Wanna help me grab the drinks from the truck?"

A small flicker of fear came to life in the pit of Mike's stomach but he quickly stifled it down. Though his instincts were to be intimidated by his girlfriend's father the more logical side of his brain knew he had nothing to be scared of from Hopper. Mike had screamed at him



and punched him in the stomach and a couple hours later he let Mike spend the night in Eleven's room.

"Sure." He answered, sharing a short glance with Eleven before following him through the house and out the front door.

Mike's skin was still used to the chill of the late December air since he'd barely had time to thaw inside the house. They walked in silence for a few paces until Hopper spoke up. "You guys have fun tonight?"

"Yeah." Mike answered. "And we called her Jane the whole night I promise."

Hopper smirked slightly. "Relax, I know you guys did. I was more worried about her messing up than I was about you."

"Well she did really well. She stuck to the story the whole night."

"Good." Hopper unlocked the car, but instead of grabbing the bags from the backseat he turned back to Mike. "Listen, kid, I... I'm sorry for not telling you about her all that time."

Mike blinked at him, obviously taken aback. Since the night she came back Mike and Hopper hadn't once discussed how he had kept them apart. It was much too awkward of a topic to bring up. The air around them shifted in an instant and Mike shuffled his feet, unsure how to reply. "Oh, um, it's okay."

"Well I know it's not okay." Hopper said, smirking slightly. "I thought I was protecting her but... I was being selfish. I should have let you see her." Mike simply nodded, not knowing what to say. "But let me tell you, living with her wasn't a walk in the park. If I wasn't as stubborn as she was I think her constant talking about you might have killed me."

Mike couldn't help but smile, "She is pretty stubborn."

"I have to admit that sometimes it's hard for me to see you guys together." It was then Hopper's turn to be uncomfortable. "I had a girl once before her. Sarah. She was only seven."

He raised an eyebrow. "What happened to her?"

"She, uh, got sick." Hopper said, growing visibly uncomfortable. "The point is that I'm not used to having a kid that's all grown up, you know? She's growing up, trying to go to school, has a boyfriend and everything. It's hard sometimes to face that she's a young woman." Hopper turned back towards the van and pulled out two liter bottles of soda, handing one to Mike. "But I know how important you guys are to each other so I'm trying to suck it up."

Mike couldn't help but smile a little bit. Nothing that Hopper said came as much of a surprise to him, but hearing him say it was something Mike never expected. "Thanks." Mike said simply, unsure of what else to say.

Hopper grinned back at him, clapping one of his hands on Mike's shoulder. "No problem kid. Plus there's definitely worse guys in town for her to date."

He nodded in agreement, thinking back to his classmate that had approached Eleven at the Snow Ball. Though Mike decided to keep his mouth shut, unsure how Hopper would react to someone hitting on Eleven.

They walked back up to the house, Mike struggling to keep a straight face. Both Mike and Eleven had been dreaming about the night of the Snow Ball for over a year and it turned out to be, at least for him, everything he dreamed of and more. Though he could feel the night slowly coming to a close he, for once, wasn't dreading saying goodbye to Eleven. And not just because he knew he was seeing her again in two days.

It was obvious by the look on her face when he returned to the Byers' kitchen that the night couldn't have gone better for her. An ear to ear grin was plastered on her face as she chewed on her slice of pizza and laughed with their friends. She beamed at him when he came back into the room and pushed out the chair next to her for him to sit. Mike sat next to her, holding her hand underneath the table and grabbing himself his own slice of pizza as he quickly immersed himself into the conversation, unsure if the night could get any

## 13. Chapter 13

This update includes some sensitive subjects about violence. If that is a topic that upsets you please be cautious and aware while reading this chapter. That being said I hope you enjoy it!

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The early June air stung Mike's lungs as he pedaled on his bike as hard as his thin legs would allow. He'd made the trip to the Byers' house on his bike countless times, but he'd never before felt the sense of panic he had that night. The adrenaline that pumped through his veins helped to mask the pain of pushing his body more than he was used to. As he turned into his friend's neighborhood his mind forced him to relive the night he'd had so far. Try as he might to push the memory of his most recent fight with his father out of his mind his angry shouts echoed in his ear.

Mike forced himself to think of the one thing that could cheer him up no matter what; Eleven. She had spent the last year and a half putting 110% into catching up on schoolwork enough to go to school with them in their sophomore year, which was only three months away. Her bedroom had a stack of study books that she flew through faster than anyone expected her too. She had given up watching tv in her free time almost entirely and spent the whole day while Hopper was at work studying. Mike often brought his homework over to her house (she and Hopper had moved into a house he'd bought in town as part of her transition into society) with him when he went to visit her so they could work together.

In a year and a half she had made it to halfway through the curriculum of seventh graders. They were all secretly worried that she wouldn't be able to catch up another two and a half grades by the first day of school in September but no one dared to voice their concerns out loud.

Finally reaching the Byers' house Mike set his bike down on the front lawn and climbed up the stairs to the porch, knocking on the front door a few times. Joyce's car was in the driveway while Johnathan's was absent while he was likely at work. He could hear footsteps inside approaching only a few moments before the front door open and

Joyce stood in its place. Her usual bright smile faltered slightly when her gaze landed on Mike's right cheek. He cringed slightly, his hopes that the red mark would have disappeared during the almost ten minute ride immediately squashed.

Joyce attempted to smile as brightly as she normally would as she stepped to the side and opened the door wider. "Come on in sweetie." She said, closing the door behind him once he entered the house. "You okay, Mike?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." He answered out of force of habit.

Though he knew she didn't believe him in an instant. She frowned slightly, coming over to him and touching the slightly sore spot on his cheek. "You don't look alright, hon." She said, her eyes scanning his face for any other injuries. "You don't have to tell me what happened but if you need to stay the night just say the word."

Mike swallowed the lump that settled in his throat. Joyce always knew just what to say to break down the walls he built up to barricade his emotions away from the outside world. He nodded a few times, clearing his throat quietly. "Can I?"

A small smile replaced her frown. "Of course." She told him, "I was just making dinner now. Will's working on homework in his room."

He nodded and turned to walk down the hall, managing to compose himself on the short trip to Will's room. Mike could hear the staticky radio Will had on his desk playing a rock station, which wasn't uncharacteristic of him. When he reached his room Mike knocked on the door a few times before cracking it open and stepping inside.

Will straightened up slightly and turned in his chair, a short look of confusion passing over his face when he spotted Mike standing in the doorway. "Hey," he said, reaching for his radio and turning the volume down, "You okay?"

Mike shrugged and came in, sitting on the edge of Will's bed and sliding his backpack off his arm. "Sort of." He admitted. "I got in a fight with my dad. Is it okay if I spend the night here?"

"Only if you tell me what happened." Will countered, well aware of Mike's reluctance to talk about any issues going on at home.

He let out a short sigh, crossing his legs underneath him. "My report card got mailed home today. I knew it wasn't going to be stellar so I was planning on grabbing it out of the mailbox before he could see it but he was home sick from work today so he saw it and wasn't happy."

Will raised an eyebrow at him. "What did you get?" he asked.

Mike deflated slightly, embarrassed about his grades. "Mostly B's. Only one A and I even got two C's." he admitted.

"That's not that bad at all."

"It is compared to what I usually get." Mike replied, to which Will didn't argue.

Most people who knew Mike knew that he took his school work seriously and could be somewhat of an over achiever. But Will may have been one of the only ones who knew exactly why he strived so hard to succeed academically. He was terrified of being a disappointment to his parents and doing something that might cause any sort of argument. But for once he had something in his life that was more important than keeping his grades high to prevent conflict at home.

Mike knew he had spent more time helping Eleven with her academics rather than his own, and he knew he would pay the price for it at the end of the semester when his report card came back. But he'd gotten poor report cards before and had always managed to hide them. His parents didn't care enough to ask him about it if he managed to grab the mail first. But when they managed to get their hands on his grades first it usually ended in a fight. Though there'd never been one so bad.

"So what happened?" Will asked, fully turning in his chair to face him and resting his arm across the back.

He let out a short sigh, already cringing at the memory that had

happened only a little over an hour ago. "I came home from school and he just started yelling at me that I'm awful and I have to do better and all that." Will shook his head but stayed silent. "And, you know, I never usually fight back. But I just kind of... snapped. They finally have some kind of clue of how hard things have been lately and they're more on their case than ever."

"Such bullshit." Will mumbled to himself.

"So I started yelling back at him, like why can't he cut me some slack for once." Mike continued, staring down at his hands in his lap. "But I've never really yelled back at him before, and I don't think he really knew how to react, so he kind of lost it."

Will waited for him to continue for a moment, then asked "What do you mean?" when he didn't.

"He..." Mike's voice trailed off, not wanting to admit what had happened. Not wanting to admit that he was weak and powerless, or worthless just like his father thought he was. But he reminded himself that Will wasn't one to judge and if there was anyone he could talk to about his home life it was his best friend. "He slapped me."

Will recoiled slightly as if he himself had been struck. Mike and his father had gotten into lots of fights over the years, and Will knew it, but things had never gotten physical before. Thankfully the shock had masked most of the physical pain. Though as his angry adrenaline started to wear off Mike's cheek was growing increasingly painful.

Will's face morphed into a combination of sympathy and anger. Mike could see a similar protectiveness he had felt for Will during his parents' divorce in his face. Some of his embarrassment melted away at the reassurance that his best friend was just as protective over him as Mike was.

"What are you gonna do?" Will asked him, a shallow crease settling between his brows.

"What do you mean?"

"Well you can't just go home after something like that."

"That's why I'm spending the night." Mike replied, unsure what point Will was trying to make. "It'll all blow over by tomorrow and it'll be okay. My mom will talk to him."

Will let out a short sigh, "Mike, this is different from just a fight. He *hit* you." Mike cringed slightly. For some reason hearing someone else say it packed more of a punch than when he admitted it. "What he did isn't okay. In fact, it's illegal. And I know how you get after you guys fight. You always apologize even if you didn't do something wrong. You *cannot* do that now."

"I wasn't going to." Mike insisted.

"This is really serious, Mike." Will continued. "Something needs to be done. Holly's about the age you were when you guys started to fight. Do you want her to go through what you did?"

Mike's gaze dropped to the floor as he let Will's words sink in. Holly would be going into second grade in September. He remembered his very first fight he'd ever had with his dad when he'd been that age. Someone had been mean to Will so Mike pushed them off the swing. His teacher called home and told his parents what happened and when he got picked up he got an earful about controlling his actions. The thought of Holly getting into an equally insignificant amount of trouble and getting the same reaction from their dad made his stomach twist into a tight knot.

"I don't even know what I *can* do." Mike admitted softly, his voice hardly above a whisper. He hated the feeling of being helpless, despite how often he felt it.

"Maybe you can tell Eleven and Hopper and see how they can help." Will suggested.

Mike's head snapped up, "No." he said immediately. "I don't want Eleven to know."

Confusion crossed over Will's face, understandably so. Mike and Eleven were like two open books with each other. There were few

things they didn't know about each other. Will's confusion about Mike keeping such a big secret from her was valid. "Why not?"

"You know how she is." Mike replied, "If she finds out about this she's gonna get angry, and when she gets angry she gets irrational. I don't want her to do something she'll regret just because she wants to protect me."

"So what? You're not gonna tell her at all?" Will asked.

"I'll tell her we got in a fight, and maybe I'll tell her what happened eventually. But not right now." Mike said, "Please don't tell her."

Will let out a reluctant sigh. "Fine, I won't. Only if you promise not to minimize how bad the fight was besides that." Mike nodded in agreement. "You wanna call her?"

"Can I?"

"Only if I can stay to make sure you don't lie about anything else."

If it was any of his other friends Mike would have said no. They already teased him about being love sick enough. But Will hardly ever participated in the teasing. They switched places so Mike sat at the desk next to the phone and Will brought his homework with him to sit on the bed so he could pretend not to listen in.

He dialed the number to the house, which he had only recently memorized, and waited while it rang. There was a chance she and Hopper were eating dinner and that he couldn't talk to her for very long but he just needed to hear her voice. If there was anyone other than Will who could cheer him up it was Eleven.

"Mike?" her voice asked from the other line once it stopped ringing.

A small smile crept onto his face, "How'd you know?"

"I didn't. I called your house a few minutes ago and Nancy said you weren't there and I got worried."

A pang of guilt rang in his chest. "Sorry. I'm spending the night at Will's, it was kind of a last-minute plan."



"Okay. Tell him I said hi."

"I will. What are you doing?"

"My dad got a call and had to go to work for a little while. He wouldn't say what it was but he said he'd bring home something special for dinner. I'm doing homework."

"What are you working on?"

"History." She replied, which didn't come as much of a surprise. History was Eleven's favorite subject and the one she understood best. Learning about everything that had happened in the world never ceased to fascinate her and it was adorable. "I'm studying the Great Depression. It's sad."

"It is pretty sad. What you learn next is gonna be worse, though."

"What's that?"

"World War 2."

"Doesn't sound fun." She agreed, "Are you still coming over this weekend?"

"Of course." Mike said, "What do you wanna do? Go out or stay in?"

He knew the answer before she replied. "Go out. Can we see a movie?"

There were strict rules when it came to going out. They could only go to a handful of places (the mall, a few local stores, the park, and the quarry) and could only stay out for a few hours. Whoever gave them a ride to the mall had to stay near. And, of course, they had to keep a low profile. Their usual routine for days out was going to see a movie since it offered them some privacy, especially when Nancy and Johnathan drove them to the mall.

"Sure. What do you wanna see?"

"Can we see *The Breakfast Club* again?"

"Yeah, of course. I'll see if Nancy can take us so Hopper doesn't have to take off work."

"Okay. I should do more homework. Will you call me before you go to sleep?"

"Sure. Talk to you then. Love you."

"Love you too."

The usual pang of disappointment Mike felt whenever they hung up swelled in his chest as he set the phone down on the receiver. He turned in his chair to face Will who was already looking at him. "You didn't mention the fight." He pointed out.

"Oops."

"Mike, come on."

"It didn't come up. I'll tell her, I promise. But she was in a good mood."

Will smirked, "Of course she was in a good mood. She was talking to you."

Mike rolled his eyes despite the wide smile that spread on his face.

The two of them quickly moved on from the topic of pulled out their unfinished homework, chatting about much more mundane things while they worked. The combination of working on his algebra homework and talking about a project Will was working on in his art class helped to clear his mind as much as was possible given what had happened that day. His poor grades were still in the back of his mind and his father's shouts echoed in his ears but he was, for the most part, able to focus on his work. The smell of dinner from the kitchen grew stronger and stronger as time went on so when there was a soft knock on the door Mike fully expected Joyce to call them in for dinner.

"Come in!" Will called from the head of his bed.

Sure enough Joyce pushed the door open. But Mike was completely

unprepared to see Hopper standing behind her, both of them wearing unsure expressions. He and Will shared a look as the two adults walked in.

"Mind if we talk?" Joyce asked, the question directed more at Mike than Will.

"Um, sure." He answered, his confusion clear in his voice.

Joyce sat down next to Will at the head of his bed while Hopper took the chair at his desk. Will's room was small so despite them being spread out they were all still close together. Hopper rested his elbows on his knees and let out a short puff of breath before speaking. "Nancy gave me a call today. Let me know what happened."

Of course she did. Nancy came home smack in the middle of the fight, only a few minutes before Mike got hit. Try as she might to diffuse the tension her efforts were wasted. As soon as their fathers hand connected with Mike's face she pulled him upstairs into her bedroom and did her best to console him as quickly as she could before she had to go to work. Mike had gotten on his bike and started the trip to Will's house before she left the house so he should have expected her to put in a call to Hopper.

"Oh." Mike replied simply.

"What do you wanna do about it, kid?"

"He doesn't want to do anything about it." Will answered for him, his tone making it clear he disagreed with Mike's reluctance to take action.

"I just don't wanna make things any worse." Mike said defensively. "And I know that if I make a big deal about it it will make it worse. Tomorrow things will have calmed down and I'll see if my mom will talk to him about it."

Hopper shared a glance with Joyce that made Mike wonder what they had talked about before coming into the room. "Do you and your dad fight often?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know."

"Pretty often." Will answered for him.

"Has it ever gotten physical before?"

He shook his head, "No, never. So it's not a big deal, alright?"

"Mike it's absolutely a big deal." Hopper said, catching him off guard by using his first name. "You did the right thing by coming over here, but you know this can happen again and that you may not be able to leave every time."

He shifted uncomfortably in his spot at the foot of Will's bed. "Yeah, I know." He admitted quietly. "I just don't know what to do."

"Do you feel safe going home tomorrow?" Hopper asked, the sympathy in his voice increasing.

"Yeah, I think so." Mike said, "It always blows over by the next day."  
"And what about if it happens again?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, well, if it ever happens again you make sure you call someone. Either me or Joyce or someone else who can come pick you up." Hopper said, now sounding serious. "And if it ever happens again you tell me and I'll talk to him because that's totally unacceptable. Alright?"

Mike felt his cheeks starting to feel warm, not used to the sort of attention he was getting. "Okay." He said. "Please don't tell Eleven. I don't want her to know, not yet?"

Hopper's brows came together, creasing his forehead. "Why not?" he asked, appearing just as confused as Will had been.

"I don't want her to worry about me." Mike explained. "If she finds out about this she'll get all worked up for no reason and she won't believe me when I tell her I'm fine."

"Are you really fine, though, sweetie?" Joyce asked.

"I am." He insisted.

None of them really seemed to believe him.

## 14. Chapter 14

Haha wow it's been a hot minute since I updated this story. I hope you didn't forget about it! I'm sorry for not updating this so long but as some of you may know I've been working really hard on other stories.

Also a friend of mine suggested I start up a and I was wondering if anyone would be interested in that? I have a few ideas already for perks but I won't do it if no one would be interested. Let me know and enjoy this chapter :)

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"You gonna tell her what happened?"

Mike looked up at Will from his bike he was picking up off the ground. The incident at home had happened three days ago and he'd been staying with the Byers ever since. Though he'd intended on going home Nancy had dropped off some clothes and other things he might need and told him it was okay for him to stay another few days. He decided to go back to his house on Sunday, which was two days away, since it seemed to be enough time for everything at home to calm down.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe. If it comes up I'll think about it."

"You know it'll come up." Will said, leaning against the porch. "She can read you like a book. She'll know something is up."

Mike had avoided having to tell Eleven anything of what happened. Though she was curious as to why he had been staying with Will so long she seemed content with unanswered questions. He was about to leave the house to meet her at the mall for a date she had been looking forward to all week. Though he was relieved he'd gotten away with not telling her thus far he knew Will had a point. Eleven knew him better than anyone. It would have been a miracle if she didn't know something was up.

"I just don't want her to worry about me." Mike said, swinging his leg over his bike and sitting on the seat. "She's got too much going on

right now, she can't be distracted."

Will stood up and walked by his side as Mike started heading down the dirt driveway. "Okay, but maybe leaving her wondering will make her even more distracted and worried about you."

Mike sighed, not wanting to admit that Will had a point. He always did. "I don't know, I'll think about it." He said instead. "I'll let you know what happened when I get home, okay?"

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Will said with a smirk.

He managed a laugh before pedaling off and onto the street. The bike ride to the mall was around fifteen minutes, giving him lots of time to think. But it seemed that all Mike had done in the past week was think so he let his mind wander wherever it pleased. And, as usual, it wandered to his girlfriend. Eleven had way too much on her mind to be busy worrying about him. She was so focused on catching up with her schoolwork and Mike didn't want to put her progress in jeopardy just because he had problems at home. Eleven was well aware that he and his father didn't get along. He didn't want to worry her with the specifics of one particularly bad fight.

When the mall came into sight Mike felt a familiar sense of excitement begin to bubble up in his stomach. He set his bike on the bike rack and hurried inside and to the ice cream shop where they planned on meeting. Eleven was getting more and more freedom with every passing day. Still Mike was surprised when he spotted her sitting at a table with Hopper nowhere in sight. The overprotective father figure was usually reluctant to leave her alone in public places, even for short amounts of time. Mike figured that she must have had to do some serious convincing to be there alone.

Eleven jumped out of her chair when she spotted him and hurried over to greet him, throwing her arms around his neck and planting a kiss on his lips. Mike hadn't been so glad to see her in a long time and held the kiss longer than she clearly expected him to. She grinned up at him when he finally pulled away, her cheeks flushing an adorable pink. "Miss me?"

"You have no idea." Mike agreed, keeping his arm wrapped around

her waist. "Want some ice cream before we see the movie?"

Eleven nodded and they walked up to the counter. She ordered strawberry and Mike got himself a vanilla before he insisted on paying for her dessert. Though she attempted to fight him on the topic she eventually gave up and gave him a thankful kiss. They sat back down at the table she had previously been at and held hands on the surface while she told him about her day while he'd been at school.

"You're quiet today." she noted between spoonful's of ice cream, her thumb gently brushing across the back of his hand.

Mike shrugged his shoulders, attempting to be as casual as he could. "I had an uneventful day." He said. "And I like just listening to you."

She smiled at him and ate another mouthful. "How's Nancy and Holly?"

"Nancy's really busy with preparing for college and trying to find a summer job." Mike answered. "Holly wants to join the school play but she can't sing or dance so we're trying to keep her from getting her hopes up."

"How's your parents?"

Mike kept his gaze fixed on his almost finished ice cream, afraid that if he looked at her she would read something microscopic in his expression. "They're fine." He told her, unsure what else to say and afraid of saying too much.

"Just fine?"

He shrugged his shoulders again. "You know, they're my parents."

In his peripheral vision he saw something in her demeanor change. She sat up straighter and her expression hardened slightly. Mike knew he needed to do a better job at lying. "Did something happen, Mike?"

He forced himself to look at her and gave her hand a light squeeze. "It's nothing, El. Just a fight. It's really not a big deal."



He watched her eyes narrow slightly while she inspected his body language. Mike struggled not to squirm under her intense gaze. "Are you sure?" she asked, "You seem off."

"I'm okay, El. Really."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Promise?"

Had it been anyone else he would have promised without a second thought. But the concept of a promise held such importance to El that Mike felt guilty about lying before he even did it. Lying to Eleven wasn't something that came easy to him especially since one of the first things he taught her was that friends didn't lie. But it was for her own good.

"Yeah." Mike answered simply, hoping it would be good enough.

But he knew it wasn't be. A small frown formed on her lips and she pouted at him from across the table. "Friends don't lie, Mike." She reminded him, "Please tell me what happened."

Mike shook his head, his overgrown bangs falling into his eyes. "El, it's fine, really. You're just going to worry about me for nothing so I'm not going to tell you."

Eleven pulled her hand out of his grip and leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. "Fine." She said stubbornly. "I'm not going into the movie until you tell me what happened."

He sighed and glanced across the food court. From their spot he could just barely make out the movie times if he squinted his eyes tightly. He looked down at his watch before meeting her eyes again. "El, come on, our movie starts in a little more than five minutes. We have to buy our tickets and snacks and get our seats."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not going until you tell me."

Mike groaned and leaned back against his own seat, his leg starting to shake underneath the table. He and Eleven had yet to get into a fight since she returned to him and he was desperate to keep it that way. But was he so desperate that he was willing to tell her about what had really happened with his dad? Seeing her jaw set with

determination made some of his resolve crumble.

Mike sighed and rubbed his hand across his chin. "Okay, okay, I'll tell you. But you have to promise not to freak out, okay?"

Eleven immediately grinned with the satisfaction of winning and perked up. "Promise."

"Okay." He said, leaning forward again and resting his elbows on the tabletop. "We got in a fight about my grades because they weren't as good as they usually word. It got pretty bad and he... hit me."

"What?" Eleven immediately leaned forward and wrapped her hands around his. "Mike why didn't you tell me?!"

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Because I knew you would get upset and I don't want you to worry about me. You have too much to focus on to waste your time like that."

"Waste my time?" she repeated in disbelief. "Mike you're my boyfriend, I love you, nothing about you is a waste of my time." She let go of his hands to grab both of their empty cups before pushing her chair out. "You know what; forget the movie."

"What?"

Eleven tossed their cups into the garbage and came back over to him, pulling him to his feet. "We're gonna go back to my house and you're gonna tell me everything you've been keeping from me about your dad."

"El no-" he began.

She quickly cut him off by shushing him. "Mike it's my job to worry about you unnecessarily. But this? This is necessary worrying. We can watch a movie at my house but right now I just wanna be with you, okay?"

Mike wanted to protest that he was perfectly fine and that they should go to the theatre but he could see the fear she was trying to mask in her eyes. He sighed once again and grabbed her hand. "Yeah, okay." he said reluctantly, "Let's go to your house."

She walked close by his side as they made their way through the mall and outside to the bike rack. Her arms wrapped tightly around his waist and her head rested against his back as he pedaled in the direction of Hopper's trailer.

He could practically feel all her unanswered questions hanging above their heads the whole twenty-minute ride. Mike was silently dreading having to go into detail about the fight, fearing appearing weak to the strongest person he knew. Though he couldn't help but feel a bit foolish for ever thinking he could hide something that was, admittedly, such a big deal from someone who knew him inside and out. All his friends knew the bare minimum details about the fight. Mike prayed telling Eleven would be easier than telling the rest of the party at the lunch table.

The ride to the trailer went by fairly quickly and soon Mike was setting his bike down on the front lawn while Eleven took her keys out of her bag and unlocked the front door. The couch was open and covered in books and papers from her studying. Almost as soon as she walked in she started collecting the books and setting them on the coffee table beside it. Once the bed was cleared off she told Mike to sit down before heading into the kitchen.

She returned less than a minute later with a freshly microwaved plate of Eggos that she set in front of him before sitting next to him on the couch. Eleven threw a blanket over both their shoulders and inched as close to him as she could so they could share it. "Okay," she said once she was settled in, "tell me what happened."

Mike shrugged, his arm moving against hers. "There's nothing to say, really." He told her, keeping his eyes fixed on the Eggos they both picked at. "We just fought about my grades."

"Well what did he say?"

He felt a small lump start to form in his throat and he attempted to swallow it down. "He just said that I need to do better." In his peripheral vision he could see Eleven's expression that told him she didn't believe that was all. "And he told me that... I was a disappointment."

Eleven wrapped her arm around his waist, keeping him close to her. It wasn't the first time they'd talked about his father. But this was the first time Eleven didn't immediately get angry and offer to stand up to him. "What else?"

"He said that he was done getting his hopes up because I always let him down." Mike crossed his legs and pulled them up towards his chest. "And I don't know what got into me but I just didn't want to hear it anymore, so I yelled back at him why he can never just give me a break. And he got this look on his face, and I knew I messed up, and then..."

Mike's voice got caught in his throat and he knew if he spoke anymore he would risk crying in front of Eleven. Not that he'd never cried in front of her before, it was just something he didn't necessarily want to do. He felt her hand go up to his back and start rubbing small, soothing circles, and Mike felt his throat start to burn. He tried and tried to keep a straight face but his father's shouts echoing in his head and Eleven's kind words in his ear were at war with each other and leaving his emotions out of whack.

In an instant the floodgates opened and Mike allowed the tears he'd been holding back since the incident to come out. Eleven immediately wrapped both her arms around him and pulled him into a tight embrace. The front he'd been putting up in front of everyone besides Will and Nancy slowly crumbled away until he was an emotional vulnerable mess. Eleven sat silently, rubbing his back and pressing kisses to the top of his head while he simply cried into her neck.

Mike had no idea how long they sat on the couch holding one another while he cried. It must have been awhile since once he started to calm down his nose felt raw and his head was pounding. When he sobs started to turn to sniffles Eleven used her powers to turn on the television and flipped through the channels until she found something they both liked. Though Mike wasn't exactly the biggest fan of talking about his home life he felt a weight lifted off his shoulder that he didn't have to hide the fight from her anymore.

"Mike?" she asked to get his attention. He picked his head up to look at her and instantly saw the sympathy written across her face. "Your

dad is an idiot. You're *not* a disappointment. You're the most amazing thing that ever happened to me and I don't want you to ever think anything he says about you is right."

Mike blinked up at her a few times, letting her words sink in. It wasn't just what she said but how earnestly and truthfully she said them that threatened to make him cry again. "I love you EL."

"I love you too, Mike."

He rested his head back on her shoulder and they sat mostly in silence watching the screen in front of them. She absently ran her fingertips through his hair, making his eyelids feel heavier and heavier by the minute. He felt himself slowly drifting off, the exhaustion from crying so hard and relief of letting out a secret only making staying awake more difficult. Try as he might to keep his eyes open he eventually gave up and allowed himself to slip into sleep.

xXx

Jim Hopper noticed a bike laying on his front lawn as soon as he pulled up to his trailer home. He didn't need three guesses to figure out who's it was. Though his first instinct was to worry about Mike and Eleven being home alone he reminded himself of everything Wheeler had been going through and decided to cut him a bit of slack. He yanked his keys out of the ignition before getting out of his truck and making his way up to the house.

He pushed the unlocked door open and his eyes immediately landed on the two teens. Hopper took a second to take in the scene; Mike asleep on Eleven's shoulder, a half finished plate of Eggo's in front of them, the television on in front of them, the blanket wrapped around them, and the faraway look on Eleven's face. She only snapped out of her deep thoughts when he closed the front door as quietly as he could to not wake the boy up.

"What's going on?" he asked as he hung his jacket on the back of one of the kitchen chairs only a few feet away.

"He got in a bad fight with his dad and was upset." Eleven said,

keeping her voice low. "Really upset."

"Oh yeah?" Hopper asked, doing his best to keep as straight of a face as possible, knowing how much trouble he would be in if she found out that he knew what happened and didn't tell her. "What was the fight about?"

Eleven rolled her brown eyes. "Grades. It's so stupid."

Hopper shook his head, pretending to be shocked to hear such a bad fight was about grades. "It's a shame."

"He's been staying with Will." Eleven said, looking forward at the television. "I'm surprised Joyce didn't tell you what happened."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't seen her in a while."

Hopper watched Eleven's eyebrows pull together in the middle of her forehead. "You stopped by to see her four days ago." She corrected, looking at him once more. While he tried to think of an excuse to brush her off he saw her eyes go wide and her mouth hang open. "That was the day of the fight."

He felt his heart sink slightly, anticipating the young girls' wrath. "Listen, kid..."

Eleven gently used her powers to keep Mike suspended in the air as she crawled off the couch and got to her feet. Her expression turned cold and angry as she crossed the room to stand in front of him. With her standing and him sitting they were the same height. "You *knew* about this? And you *never* told me?!" she whisper-shouted at him, "Why the hell would you keep something like this from me?"

"Because he told me not to tell you, alright?" Hopper hissed back, keeping his voice just as low. "It wasn't my place to tell you, especially since he told me not to. I told Joyce and Will to try and convince him to tell you, I didn't think it would take so long."

Eleven threw her hands up in the air. "You could have told me something was wrong and left it at that! You could have said they got in a fight and that I should ask him about it. You shouldn't have left me totally clueless."

"I'm sorry, okay!" Hopper whisper shouted. "But the kid barely trusts me after hiding you from him. I wasn't going to go behind his back like that."

She crossed her arms across her chest. "So what are we gonna do about it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well he can't just go home." Eleven said as if it was painfully obvious. "Something has to be done. This can't happen again."

Hopper sighed and rested his elbows on his knees. "Well I don't know what to do, kid. I can't arrest him. If Mike was more cooperative about it I could *maybe*. The most I can do is talk to his mom and make sure she knows how serious this is."

She nodded her head, "Okay, good. We'll do that. But what about tonight?"

"What about tonight?"

"Well I'm not leaving him after something like this." Eleven told him, her voice sounding just as determined as the look on her face. "So I can either spend the night at the Byer's or he can spend the night here."

"El-"

"You owe me."

Hopper sighed once more, knowing she was right. Though he didn't regret keeping the secret he couldn't deny that he did need to make it up to her now that she knew he had been keeping something so big from her. "Yeah, alright, he can stay here tonight. We can talk about what we're gonna do."

Her face immediately lit up into a large smile and she came over to give him a quick hug. "Thank you." She said, giving him a squeeze before pulling away and going back to the spot next to Mike on the couch and slowly lowering his head onto her shoulder again.

Though the idea of them having a sleepover wasn't on top of his to-do list he knew that they had way too much on their minds to do anything Hopper had to worry about. He got to his feet, shaking his head a few times. "I'm gonna take a shower and order something for dinner when I get out so at some point you gotta wake him up and ask him what he wants."

Eleven eagerly nodded her head before looking back down at her sleeping boyfriend. As Hopper headed down the hall towards the bathroom he was baffled by how whipped he was for that kid.

xXx

Mike lay flat on his back staring up at the ceiling while the clock on the wall on the opposite side of the room ticked away. He doubted he would get any sleep that night and not just because he took an unexpected nap. The day played on repeat in his head over and over again. Part of him felt deflated now that he wasn't carrying the burden of the secret anymore. But the conversation he, Eleven, and Hopper had was now hanging over his head.

Hopper promised to have a talk with his mom in the morning before he brought Mike back to the Byers' and later that night he would go home. Though Mike loved his mom he doubted there was much she could or would do about his father. She had a weak backbone that didn't stand a chance against his father's anger. All that ran through his mind as he tried to sleep was that though he appreciated his friends' attempt at helping he wished they could just understand that things weren't going to change.

The sound of soft footsteps coming from down the hall interrupted his train of thought and Mike propped himself up on his elbows to see who was coming. He spotted Eleven, dressed in flannel pajamas, standing in the threshold of the living room. Her hair had finally grown out long enough for her to put it in a ponytail that rested on the nape of her neck. "Can't sleep?" he asked her.

She shook her head and came towards him, crawling into the empty space he made for her as she approached. Eleven pulled the blankets up to her chin and lay on her side to face him, their noses only a few inches apart. The only source of light was the moonlight spilling in



through the window on the opposite side of the room that cast harsh shadows across her face.

"You okay?" he asked her, sensing something in her expression.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" she replied, wrapping one of her arms around his waist. "I'm worried about you, Mike."

"Don't be." He told her, tucking a curl that had escaped her ponytail behind her ear.

She rolled her eyes at him. "You know I can't do anything about it. Are you sure you're going to be okay going home tomorrow night?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." He assured her, even though he was beginning to wonder the same thing.

It had been almost a full week since he'd been at his house and seen anyone in his family besides Nancy. Would things be tense when he went back? Would they be mad at him? Would another fight break out? Though Mike knew better than to voice any of his concerns to an already worried Eleven. There was no need to burden her with his possibly paranoid anxieties.

"Will you tell me if anything happens again?" she asked.

"Yeah, of course."

"No, Mike, you have to promise me." She said. "You're not doing me any favors by keeping me in the dark about stuff like this. How would you feel if my dad hit me and I didn't tell you?"

"I didn't think about it like that." He admitted quietly.

Eleven put her hands on his cheeks and kissed the tip of his nose. "I know it's hard to talk about your parents sometimes but I'm here for you, okay? I love you no matter what."

Mike wrapped his arms tightly around her waist and buried his face in her neck, the scent of her shampoo filling his nose. "I'm sorry for not telling you."

He could feel her arms wrap around his neck, her fingers gently running through his hair. "It's okay." She told him. "Just please don't do it again. You're allowed to not tell me things but when it's something like this you have to tell me what's going on."

Though Mike had been reluctant to tell her about what happened for a while he felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Keeping secrets from Eleven wasn't something he was used to. He told her practically everything that happened in his life. She knew him inside and out. Now that he had told her about the fight with his father he was amazed that he had gone so long without telling her. He couldn't help but feel a bit foolish for thinking it was something he needed to be embarrassed about. She, along with Will, was the last person he needed to be embarrassed around when it came to revealing something so personal about himself. She never judged and never teased him.

"I'll tell you if it happens again." He told her, "I promise."

A small smile made its way onto her face. "Good." She said. Eleven ran her fingers through his dark hair, placing a kiss on his forehead. "I'm here for you, Mike. Just like you've always been here for me."

"I love you, El."

"I love you more."

He doubted that was possible.

## 15. Chapter 15

Though Mike knew his father was staying in a motel on the other side of town he still felt his heart start to pound as he walked up to the front door of his house for the first time in about a week. He looked over his shoulder at Joyce's car parked on the curb, both her and Will giving him a thumbs up of encouragement. If the bag on his shoulder wasn't packed so full he may have stalled longer. But between his shoulders and up his neck started to ache so he pulled his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the front door.

The house was unusually quiet without the television playing in the living room. A few steps into the house he could hear the familiar creak of the dishwasher opening and he knew his mom was home. Slowly he made his way down the hall until he was standing in the doorway, watching his mom load the dishwasher. She moved like a zombie, slow and dazed. Her hair was in a messy ponytail and he could tell it had been at least a day since she brushed it. In her right hand was a plate and in her left, between her ring and middle finger, was a cigarette.

"I thought you quit."

His mom straightened up and turned to face him. For a moment her gaze was foggy and she didn't seem to recognize him. Though she quickly lit up and brought the cigarette to her lips and took one last puff before tossing it into the sink. "Special circumstances." She said, setting the plate on the counter and coming over to his side of the room. "I'm glad you're home Michael."

"Yeah, me too." He lied. Mike slipped his bag off his shoulder and let it drop to the floor. "Are you okay?"

Karen waved his worries away and shook her head. "I'm fine, I'm fine. I've just been worried about you and your sisters." She reached up to brush his cheek with her thumb, a melancholy smile making its way onto her face. "Do you remember when someone broke in and stole the silverware when you were seven years old?"

"Yeah."

"The next morning I came out of my room and found you sleeping on the floor in the hallway with a baseball bat. And when I asked you why you weren't in your room you said 'I stayed out here to protect you in case the bad men came back'." She brushed his bangs out of his face. "I should have protected you like you've always protected us."

Mike felt his throat start to burn and he managed to blink back tears before they came spilling out. "It's okay, mom."

"No, sweetie, it's not okay." She insisted. "I've been a bad mother. I understand it's normal for teenage boys to hide things from their moms but it's *my* job to make sure you're not hiding everything." Her eyes got cloudy and he was sure she was going to cry. She sniffled and wiped at her eyes a few times before surprisingly composing herself. "Things will be different for real this time Michael. We'll figure something out."

He knew it wasn't true, still her words packed a punch. It wasn't the first time she promised her kids that things at home would change. And sometimes they did, but it never lasted more than a few months. The strength of Karen Wheeler's backbone was as wishy washy as the current of the ocean. She would stand her ground for a little while until Ted bought her a new necklace or bouquet of flowers and then everything would be the same as it always was.

But Mike also knew he couldn't tell her the truth. Not when she sounded so determined. "Yeah we'll figure something out." He told her. "I'm gonna put my stuff upstairs, okay? I'll come down in a bit."

"Yeah, sure." Karen said, take your time.

Mike picked his bag back up and headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time to avoid looking at the family pictures lining the wall. Nancy's bedroom door was closed and he guessed she was out with Johnathan or one of her friends. Holly's door, on the way to his room, was open and when he poked his head inside he found her sitting at her desk with a half finished puzzle in front of her. He knocked his knuckle against the door to get her attention and a wide, toothy grin spread on her face when she spotted him standing in the doorway.

"Mike!" she shouted, jumping down off her chair and running over to him. Holly collided with him with such force he stumbled back a step or two while her arms tightly locked around his waist. "You're finally home!"

"Well I just couldn't stay away from my favorite blonde." He said, ruffling her hair. "Wanna come help me unpack my things?"

She nodded eagerly and followed him into his room only a few feet away. While he set his belongings on his bed she climbed onto the chair at his desk. "You were gone for a long time."

Mike shrugged, "I went on a little vacation."

"A vacation from daddy?"

For a moment his heart stopped, the realization that Holly was finally old enough to realize her father wasn't her hero making him feel sick. He was close to her age when he came to the same realization. Mike had just hoped that since his anger was, for the most part, not directed at her it would take her a little longer. He should have known she wouldn't be so lucky. "Yeah, Hol, a vacation from daddy." Mike admitted.

"He's taking a vacation too." Holly told him. "Mommy said when he gets back he won't be so mad all the time."

Mike tossed his dirty laundry into the hamper next to his dresser. "We'll see about that. Just keep in mind it might not happen, okay?"

"I know." She said sadly. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Next time you take a vacation from daddy will you take me too?"

Mike looked up from his bags, studying his sister for a moment before going over to her and picking her up. She was getting too big for him to hold her but for the time being he didn't care. "If that's what you want that's what I'll do. You, me, and Nancy can all go somewhere for vacation."

"Daddy said he didn't mean to hurt you." She told him. "Is that true?"

He sighed. "No, Hol, it's not true. He might feel guilty about it but he meant to do it. Get it?"

"I get it." She said, nodding her head.

"Good." He set her down on the bed before sitting facing her. "But I don't want you to have to worry about that, alright? Everything's gonna be okay. Just try and stay in your room if you hear another argument."

Holly's brows creased. "But I want to help." She argued, "I don't want to see you hurt again."

Mike pushed some hair that had escaped from her pigtails behind her ear. "I appreciate that Hol but you need to promise me that if you ever hear me and dad fight again you'll go in your room and wait for me there."

She held his gaze for a moment, debating on whether or not to continue being stubborn, before sighing. "Fine."

He held his hand up. "Pinky promise?"

Holly hooked her pinky with his and nodded. "Pinky promise."

She sat on his bed while he continued to unpack his things, telling him about everything she'd done in school the week he'd been staying at Will's house. She told him that she wanted to try out for the school play even though their dad didn't want her to and Mike told her he thought she should do it. Holly was in the middle of telling him about a boy that had been picking on her at school when the conversation cut short by the unmistakable sound of their father's car pulling into the driveway. Mike looked out his bedroom window just in time to watch his father walking up to the house.

He quickly closed and locked his bedroom door before sitting on the bed next to his sister. "We're gonna be really quiet, 'kay Hol?"

She nodded enthusiastically before crawling into his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck. They sat their silently, both

doing their best to not move a muscle, while they waited for any kind of noise from the rest of the house. A few minutes later their parents voices overlapped with the sound of their footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Ted, I don't think it's a good idea for you to be here right now." Karen's voice said. "Maybe you should come back tomorrow while the kids are at school."

"I'm just grabbing some things, Karen. I'll be here for five minutes tops. Can't stand to see me for even five minutes?" Ted replied. "Are Holly and Nancy here?"

"Nancy's at a friends house."

"And Holly?"

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to see her." Karen said to Mike's surprise. "She's very confused and I think it would just make things worse."

Neither of them spoke as their bedroom door creaked open and they stepped inside. There were a few beats of silence before his father said any more. "Is Mike home?"

Mike felt his stomach plummet to the floor. He and Holly looked at each other as they waited to hear what their mom would say. He was prepared to tell his sister to hide under the bed when his mom, once again surprised him. "He and his friends are seeing a movie. I have no idea when he'll get home. But you shouldn't be here when he does."

He let out a quiet sigh of relief, making a mental note to thank his mom once his dad left.

Mike and Holly sat on his bed listening to what was mostly silence while his father continued to pack up his things. Only one set of footsteps headed down the hall and towards the stairs and only a minute or two later Mike could hear his fathers car engine once again. He and Holly let out a simultaneous sigh of relief. Just as they started to stand up there was a soft knock on his bedroom door.

"Michael, sweetie, can I come in?" his mom asked from the hallway.

"Your dad's gone."

Mike got up off the bed and went to his door, unlocking it and opening it to find his mom standing in the hallway. For a second her gaze seemed far away once more. Her reaction to the door opening was delayed only long enough for him to notice. But she quickly snapped back to reality and offered him a small, slightly sad smile before stepping inside. She sat down on the edge of his bed and opened her arms as Holly came over and crawled into his lap.

"Is daddy ever going to live with us again?" she asked, worry clear in her little voice.

Karen's gaze met Mike's as she hesitated answering the question. Mike leaned against his desk, wondering what she would say. On one hand Mike knew how his mom always got when it came to giving his dad consequences. She always stayed determined to make a change in the first couple of days. But she eventually always caved and everything went back to normal.

On the other hand a week had already passed. Not to mention that she'd never kicked him out of the house before. The young child within Mike, one who just wanted his mother to protect him, was hopeful that she would do the right thing and keep him away from the people he hurt the most. But after years of getting his high hopes crushed he attempted to push them down while he waited for his mom to reply to Holly.

"Maybe sweetheart." She eventually said. "But not if he's going to keep being mean to your brother and sister. He has to know that it's not okay."

"Is he going to start being mean to me too?"

"No, Hol." Mike answered, not trusting his mom with a topic so sensitive. "He's not going to start being mean to you. Nancy and I won't let him."

His mother sent him a thankful look and suggested they all go downstairs and watch something on television until Nancy got home. Mike intended to have a serious conversation with his older



sister later that night about what the hell they were going to do if Ted came back to the house.

xXx

That night Holly announced she wasn't going to bed unless they all slept in the same room which was how the Wheeler's, minus one member, were all crammed into the master bedroom. Holly was in between Nancy and Karen on the bed while Mike was on an air mattress only a few feet away. Nancy lay on her side facing him and they had a conversation through facial expressions while Holly and their mom fell asleep next to them.

When she got home Nancy told him she was looking for a job in case they needed to get out of the house for whatever reason. She had a stack of newspaper clippings in her purse she wanted to apply to including a few receptionist and cashier opinions. She also said that she wasn't going to tell their mom and she would keep the money hidden in her room. Nancy didn't want to take the chance of her saved up money being taken if they needed to stay in a hotel or something.

"I'll get a job too." Mike offered immediately. "I'll start saving up."

Nancy shook her head. "You need to be fifteen to work. And I don't want you to have to worry about money, okay? Just worry about school and your friends."

"But I want to help." He insisted.

She wouldn't hear it.

"Mike I know you think it's your job to protect everyone but it's not. You're only fourteen, you're just a kid. I'm your big sister, and a legal adult, so you're my responsibility. Especially since mom isn't taking care of us how she should. So just focus on school and keeping your grades up. And if he comes back we'll figure something out. But I don't want you in the house with him, so if I'm not home and he is I want you to leave and bring Holly if you can. Okay?"

Mike swallowed hard, struggling to accept that he couldn't help and

protect anyone and not wanting to lie back and let Nancy do all the hard work. But she was way more stubborn than he was and he knew he couldn't win the argument. "Yeah, okay."

As he lay on the air mattress, staring at the soft light reflected on the ceiling from the night light Holly brought in, Mike replayed so many things from the past week over in his head. The first night he went to Will's house and how he begged Will, Joyce, and Hopper not to tell Eleven. When he did eventually tell her and how amazingly supportive she was. How sick he felt when he realized just how aware of the situation Holly was. Her asking if Ted was going to start hurting her too.

It was all too much and Mike didn't know how much more he could take.

The sound of his mom sitting up grabbed both his and Nancy's attention and they turned to look at her. Her hair was done up in curlers, something she did every other night, and after taking her makeup off Mike could see how dark her under eyes had become. For a moment or two she was silent, looking down at a sleeping Holly, before she looked up at her other two children. "I'm going to ask my parents for a money loan tomorrow." She announced out of the blue. "So we can get our own place. So we don't have to worry about him anymore."

Mike looked at Nancy, having absolutely no clue how to respond. She seemed just as surprised as he felt, her mouth hanging open slightly and her eyes wide. Nancy rolled onto his back and folded her hands onto her stomach. "I think he should be the one to find somewhere else and we should keep the house." She said simply.

"You're right." Their mom said. Mike was sure she was going to continue but instead she lay back down.

He pulled the blankets up to his chin and shut his eyes, praying he would fall asleep at a reasonable time so he wouldn't suffer too much at school the next morning.

## 16. Chapter 16

Sorry for not updating this story in a while. I haven't had a lot of time to write but I'm still managing to come at you guys with another chapter.

In other news; I created a pa-treon page, under the same username (mcplestreet) It would mean a lot to me if you guys checked it out, even if you don't become a patron. I tried to think of some cool things to offer you and I hope I succeeded. Anyways, here's the new chapter.

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Mike and Nancy hardly ever played board games, especially without Holly. But they needed help taking their mind off what was going on downstairs so they broke out the old Monopoly box. Nancy had her radio on so they didn't run the risk of overhearing the conversation their parents were currently having. Especially if it wasn't going well. They were doing their best to pretend it was just a normal Saturday even though it was anything but. Mike had a feeling that Nancy was letting him win the game, which wasn't exactly easy but she was still trying.

"What do you think is gonna happen?" Mike asked, unable to keep his wandering thoughts to himself any longer.

He looked up from the board to see her reaction. Other than pursing her lips she didn't do much. "She's gonna tell him he can't come back."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You don't sound so certain."

"She will." Nancy repeated.

"She never has before." He pointed out.

"Yeah, well, he's never done that to you before."

Mike wanted to ask if Nancy genuinely thought their mom cared but stopped himself before the words came out of his mouth. Karen Wheeler was clearly not the greatest mom in the world but to assume

she didn't care about her own child being hit was unfair of him. Yes, Mike had a classic case of middle child syndrome. But there was no way it could be *that* bad. Besides, she'd already done more than she usually did. She'd never kicked Ted out of the house before.

But how much more did they expect her to do?

"What if she doesn't?"

Nancy shook her head. "Don't think like that." She told him. "She has to. She'd be crazy not to. Crazy or incompetent."

"Okay but *what if*?"

"I guess..." Nancy's voice trailed off for a second. "We'd have to figure something out because you can't stay here if she doesn't make him leave. It's not safe."

"So I'd be homeless?"

Nancy scoffed. "Absolutely not. We would figure something out, we always do. But I don't even want to think about that right now. Really, Mike."

"I do." He insisted. "Way worse and crazier things have happened around here and we both know it." He saw some of her confidence in her argument deflate. "So, hypothetically, what would we do if she lets him stay?"

She let out a sigh. "Well, we'd find somewhere to go tonight and the next couple days. Like Johnathan's house or a motel or something. And we'd stay there until we talk some sense into her. And if we can't then we go to Hopper and ask what can be done."

"What, like press charges?" Mike asked.

"If we have to."

"Damn." Mike said, rolling the dice and moving his piece six spaces. "You're pretty serious about this."

"Because this is serious, Mike." She told him, "I'm sick of seeing

people treat you like shit. Especially him, it's not okay."

Mike's cheeks turned warm and he looked down at the board. He had finally gotten used to Eleven being kind and overprotective of him. But other people he still struggled with sometimes. Which was stupid. Nancy was his sister, he shouldn't have been acting like a total spaz in front of her because she was saying something nice. But he figured he had his parents and their hands-off approach of affection to blame for that.

Mike wasn't sure how long he expected the conversation to last but it went on pretty long. Though Nancy had much more big red houses on her property Mike owned more and was therefore winning. At least they thought so. She pretended to be disappointed every time she had to hand over money but a small smile crossed her face when she thought he wasn't looking.

It was a little after 1 pm when there was a quiet knock on the door. Mike and Nancy exchanged a nervous look while their mom pushed the door opened and leaned against the desk. He had a feeling he knew the outcome just by the look on her face.

"So," Karen began, "We had a very long talk. And he feels very sorry about what happened last week. He assured me that it's something that will never happen again."

"And it's something that's never going to happen again because he's moving out, right?" Nancy asked.

Karen pursed her lips. "Not exactly, honey."

"Well what does that mean?"

"Nancy he's your father." She said. "We can't just kick him out of our lives."

Nancy scoffed. "Yes, we can if he's abusing your only son."

Karen looked shocked. "Don't be so dramatic, Nancy. It was a mistake he made in the heat of the moment. Everyone's done things they regret during a fight. I know you have."

Nancy rolled her eyes. "Me acting like a bitch when you won't let me go out is *way* different than a father screaming at and hitting their son!" she shot back.

"Why don't you let your brother talk?" Karen asked. "This is, after all, all because of him."

Mike didn't like the way she worded that. Like it was his fault or something. Maybe it was, he just didn't want to hear it.

"So does that mean he's coming back to live with us?" he asked, even though he knew the answer. He just needed to hear her say it.

"... yes."

Mike shared a look with Nancy, who looked like her head was about to explode. "Well that's not okay, mom." he said, turning back to face her. "Hitting your kids is a crime. People go to jail for it. He can't just come back like everything's fine."

"Well that's not what's happening." She tried to explain.

"Yes it is, mom." Mike argued back. "That's what always happens. Every time you say 'it won't be like last time' and it's always *exactly* like last time. What's it gonna take for you to kick him out? Me going to the hospital?"

Karen shook her head. "Don't talk like that Michael. He would never do that."

"Really?" Mike asked. "Because last summer after that big fight we had you told me he *would* never hit me. Do you remember that?"

He could tell by how her eyes instantly went down to the floor that she remembered it as clearly as he did.

"Screw this." Nancy said, getting up from her bed. "Mike, back a backpack. We're getting out of here."

"Excuse me?" Karen asked.

Mike stood up and hurried into his room across the hall to get some

overnight things. Though they were out of sight he could still hear Nancy and his mom fighting as clearly as if he was still there with them.

"You never treated him how he should be treated," Nancy spat at her while opening and closing her dresser drawers. "It's like he's invisible ever since Holly was born."

"That is *not* true."

"He hid a girl with telepathic powers in the basement!" Nancy shouted. "He thought his girlfriend was dead or a year! And you barely even noticed there was something wrong! *I* was the one who came when he cried every night, *I* was the one who got him to do his homework, *I* was the one making sure he was eating. Me, mom. I've been more of a mother to Mike than you *ever* have! I've protected him from everything, and thanks to you I have to protect him from his own father. That's supposed to be *your* job."

"I'd like to see you raise three kids, Nancy." Karen replied. "You really think you can do better?"

"I've already raised one." Nancy shot back. "And I've done a hell of a lot better with Mike than you. Though I won't give myself too much credit since that isn't that hard."

Mike heard his mom scoff. "Well, you're in such a rush to pack your things. Where are you two going?"

"Don't really know, don't really care." Nancy said. "Any where's better than here with you two."

"I did not raise you this way, Nancy."

"You're right, you didn't raise me."

Mike hoisted his backpack onto his shoulders and stood in Nancy's doorway, finding his mother and sister standing on opposite sides of the room glaring at each other. "Nance." He said, "You ready?"

She nodded and picked her bag off her bed, walking past her mom without another glance and leaving before she could get another

word in.

They practically ran downstairs and out the door so they wouldn't have to pass by their father who, by the looks of it, was in the kitchen. Thankfully Nancy had parked on the curb so they could just get in her car and go. They threw their bags into the trunk and Nancy slammed her foot on the gas.

"Where are we going?" Mike asked, glancing over at his sister.

"We're picking up Holly at her friends house and taking her with us." Nancy told him. "I don't trust her with them alone."

"Is it just for tonight?"

Nancy shook her head. "I don't know, Mike. We kind of have to take everything one step at a time."

Besides the radio playing music the rest of the car ride was silent. Everything that had happened in the past 20 minutes was beginning to settle in. They were pretty much running away from home. How long would it be before they went back? Mike had a feeling that Nancy wouldn't want to go back until their father was out of the house but that wasn't realistic. How long would it take? A week? A month? Would it ever even happen?

And what about Holly? They weren't fit to take care of her all by themselves. At least Mike wasn't, and Nancy didn't deserve the responsibility of raising 2 kids at the age of 17. Especially raising a kid as attached to her parents as Holly.

Mike waited in the car while Nancy went inside to get Holly. Out of all the things that had happened he never had such a strong sense that everything was falling apart. Whenever things began happening with the gate of the Upside Down they always managed to come up with some kind of plan. True, it wasn't always the smartest plan. But they always thought of something. And Mike never felt alone. Despite the fact that Nancy was very clearly there for him through everything he still somehow felt incredibly isolated.

They spent the entire car ride to the motel in the next town over



explaining to a very confused Holly that they were going on a "no parents" vacation. Telling her that she could have ice cream with dinner seemed to sway her in the right direction.

They checked into a room and got settled in while Nancy called Johnathan on the phone to tell him about what happened. Mike kept Holly company but it was hard to focus when he was itching to get his hands on the phone to call Eleven. He tried to listen to Holly telling him about her play date and be as enthusiastic as possible. The last thing they needed was for her to get upset and want to go home.

"Daddy came home didn't he?" she asked all of a sudden. "That's why mommy made me go out."

Mike glanced at Nancy in hopes of helping him out but her back was turned to them and her ear was still pressed against the phone. Holly was waiting expectantly when he turned back to her. "Yeah Hol." He said eventually. "Daddy was at the house today."

"Is he going to live with us again?"

Nancy needed to hurry and hang up the phone. "It looks like it."

Holly didn't say anything at first. She just sat and thought about what Mike had told her. He had no clue what he expected her to say next, but what she did say certainly wasn't on the list.

"I miss Daddy, but I don't like seeing you fight. Maybe no parents vacation is a good idea."

Mike wasn't really sure how to respond so he just nodded a little.

Nancy hung up the phone not too long after and Mike jumped to take it next. He dialed the number he knew by heart and waited impatiently for Eleven to answer.

"Mike?"

A wide smile spread on his face. "How'd you know it was me?"

"You're the only one that calls me." She told him. "Sometimes Max,

but not every day like you." She hesitated for a quick moment. "How did it go with your dad?"

"Not great." Mike admitted. "She let him come back."

Eleven let out a long, disappointed sigh. "I'm sorry Mike. What are you going to do?"

"Well tonight me, Nancy, and Holly are staying in a motel room." He said. "Just so that we don't have to be there."

"Motel?" Eleven asked. "Come stay with me."

Mike laughed. "That would be awesome, but I can't do that to you and Hopper. Especially not when we have Holly."

"I don't care." She insisted. "And neither would he. You're my family Mike, you shouldn't have to stay in a motel room when you can come here."

His throat burned with tears that threatened to break free but he managed to blink them away. "Maybe tomorrow, okay? But promise you'll ask Hopper and make sure it's okay with him."

"Promise." She agreed. "But I know he'll say it's okay. He's mad about what happened."

"He is?"

"Of course he is. You know he likes you. He's upset that this is happening to you because he knows you don't deserve it."

Mike's fear of Hopper not liking him sometimes prevented him from remembering that he actually did. Hopper cared about Eleven as if she were his own daughter, and Mike had a feeling that he was grateful that their reunion had gotten her out of her funk. Sure, she could be difficult and rebellious sometimes. What teenager wasn't? But, according to Hopper, the difference in her was night and day. Apparently most of her defiance was about wanting to see him, and now that she could whenever she wanted she was mostly content with staying inside.

"You can't stay in a motel forever, Mike." Eleven said, her voice sounding sad. "It's not a home. And you'll run out of money."

"I know, El. But Nancy and I are gonna figure something out." He tried to sound as certain as possible, even though their short-term motel plan was as far ahead as they had gotten. Telling Eleven wouldn't make her feel any better so there was no point. "Besides, my mom might change her mind, and then we won't need a plan."

"Maybe." She didn't sound convinced at all.

"Hey, we're still on for tomorrow right?" Mike asked her, hoping that talking about seeing each other might cheer her up a bit.

"Yes." He could hear the smile in her voice. "You're coming here?"

"Yeah, and I'll bring any movie you want me to."

"You pick this time." Eleven said. "I always pick."

Mike already knew he was going to choose a movie she herself would have picked. He had a feeling he would be bring *Footloose* which was, at the time, her favorite movie. "Okay, I'll pick. It'll be a surprise."

"Nothing scary?"

"Nope, I'll make sure it's something you'd like." He assured her. "And I'll pick up some snacks before I come over like I did last time."

"Popcorn?"

"Definitely."

"I love you Mike." She said. "I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy."

"I mean at home. It's not fair to you. Or Nancy and Holly. You shouldn't have to think of a plan, you should be able to be at home and be happy and safe."

Hearing Eleven talk about the importance of having safe environment

at home warmed his heart. When he met her Mike didn't think she could be more perfect. She proved him wrong every day.

"I don't want you to worry about me, El." He told her. Worrying wouldn't do her any good.

"I can't help it." She argued. "I can't just turn off my feelings. And I wouldn't if I could. I'm going to worry about you, you just have to suck it up."

He couldn't help but laugh. "Alright, fine, but only because that was funny. And I'm going to worry about you worrying about me."

"Fine." She agreed. "And no more secrets either, right?"

Mike doubted he would ever live down keeping such a secret from her. "Nope, no more secrets. I'm an open book."

"Good. Me too."

Though Mike appreciated her saying it he knew it wasn't exactly true. There were things about her life in the lab that he knew she might never be able to talk about. She still had a hard time whenever the topic came up. Of course he didn't blame her. Anyone in her position would struggle with their past. She had healed more than he'd ever expected her to in such a short amount of time. Still, she had a long way to go. Every time she told him something new about the lab he was horrified that it could get worse. He could only imagine the things she'd yet to say.

"Can you come early tomorrow?" Eleven asked. "12?"

"Yeah, I can come at 12."

"Can you come earlier?"

Mike laughed. "How about I come as soon as I wake up?"

"Okay. Wake up early."

"Goodnight El."

"Goodnight Mike."